

MY DOUBLE AND I

By the Same Author

—
ANGRY DUST
MARA THE GYPSY
IT'S SILLY FACE
ETC.

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MY DOUBLE AND I

SENTIMENTAL ADVENTURES

BY

NIKOLAI GUBSKY



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PART ONE

The only way to solve a set of difficult problems, reflected Robinson, is to get away from them as far as is humanly possible. Whereupon, suiting the action to the word, he turned his back on the towering waves, slid down on to the hard bottom of his canoe and intoned a tuneless song of his own composition.

—From *The Modern Robinson* (I. F. Tavrov).

GREY Atlantic sky; grey air; countless ridges of grey waves with white curly crests. Slowly, laboriously, the point of the bow draws ellipses across the line of the horizon, a line as neat and precise as though it had been cut with a sharp burin. An hour's steaming will take us to that horizon; once there we shall see another, exactly like it; after that, yet another, and so on. Four hundred horizons have to be crossed before we sight Florida. And, if we were to turn a few points to port, there would be nine hundred horizons between us and the first solid body, the Antarctic ice—nine thousand miles of nothing but sky, sea and wind. . . .

"There is too much water in the world, don't you think?" I said to Harvey, the second mate, who was leaning next to me over the rail of the bridge and looking down at the waves. He was twenty-seven, slim and short, fair-haired, with a round boyish face and gentle, friendly eyes, a woman's eyes. I usually spent most of his watch with him on the bridge. We did not talk much—at sea one has surprisingly little to say—but we liked being together.

"Too much water?" he echoed, his eyes twinkling with amusement, for the idea was new to him. "Well, perhaps there is."

"It's sheer waste of space," I continued. "One ocean instead of five would do, wouldn't it? Personally I'd leave the Pacific, because it's the warmest."

"I should say the Indian is warmer still," he corrected me.

"All right, the Indian, then."

As there was nothing more to say on the subject, we leaned again over the rail and resumed watching the waves which splashed half-heartedly against the side of the ship.

"What is the barometer doing?" I asked after a while.

"Falling," he said in a soft drawling voice, shifting his glance from the waves to the open hatch of Number One hold, from which a man was climbing out with a broom: they were cleaning the hold. "Falling rapidly. We're in for a good blow."

"I hope so."

"Do you? Well, I don't."

"But there won't be a gale," I said with great assurance. "Not a proper one, anyhow."

A gleam of curiosity appeared in his eyes and made him look more boyish still. "Why do you think so?" he asked.

"Because there is never a gale when I'm on board. Really and truly, there isn't. Shipping companies ought to employ me as their mascot. I wouldn't charge much."

He eyed me with an uncertain smile: my last remark must have been too sophisticated or too personal for him, and he did not quite know how to take it. I hastened to change the conversation.

"How much has she done in the last watch?" I asked.

My question put him at his ease, the uncertain smile left his face.

"Not much. Thirty-four," he drawled.

"Eight knots and a half? Why so little?"

"She's an old thing, you know. Going home, as we say. That means falling to pieces."

"What's wrong with her?"

"Oh, everything. The cylinder-head has a leak. The

dynamo is shaky. Old boilers—we'll have trouble with them yet. And her bottom needs scraping badly. She ought to have gone into dry-dock this time."

"Why hasn't she?"

"Why? Ask the professors of economics why." (He meant the firm's superintendents.) "They always hustle us out. Hurry, hurry, that's all they know. I bet you anything there will be a lot of repairing to do at Houston, and it'll cost the owners at least twice as much as if it was done at home."

"Don't the owners realise that?"

"Oh, the owners! They know nothing about ships, they do what their professors tell them. Mr. Robert Tweedy, that's our Chairman, only cares for his farm—he has one in Lancashire. And his brother, Mister John, is too busy getting freights to bother about anything else." He stretched himself with gusto and produced a box of cigarettes. "Have one?"

I took one and we smoked.

"And what about Lloyd's?" I asked. "Why did Lloyd's pass her if she's in this state?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"What can they do? The Chief is in mortal fear of the professors, so, if they tell him that we must push off, he paints things up in the engine-room—they know a trick or two—and Lloyd's don't see anything wrong; they say 'O.K.' and off we go. . . . Ye-ees, that's how we live, we, the British Mercantile Marine," he concluded in a mildly sarcastic sing-song.

He cast a glance round the ship, and, as nothing demanded his attention, he leant against a stanchion, and staring at the grey sky hummed in a nostalgic tenor: "*Shine, shine, harvest moon!*" I tried to speculate on what would happen if private owners were given the

Navy to run, and, conversely, if a Socialist Government were to take over all privately owned ships, but I did not get far with my reflections, for it struck me that any answer to these two questions, whether it came from me or one of the so-called experts, would be sheer guesswork. And—the main thing—nobody wanted my answer.

“This greyness is boring,” I observed. “I wish we had a little sun for a change.”

“*Shine, shine, harvest moon!*” crooned Harvey, and broke off: he never got beyond those four words. Then, remembering my remark: “I’m afraid we won’t have any sun for some days,” he said, pointing at a bank of dark clouds rising in the west.

I woke up because the heavy rolling had caused my head to shift in such a way that all its weight was pressing on my nose. The pitch darkness of the room was alive with a multitude of sounds: booming, banging, and thunderous crashes which sent an uneasy tremor along the whole body of the ship from stem to stern; the sharp hiss of the spray as it hit the decks; the unsteady, high-pitched shriek of the wind in the rigging. In the room, a glass was clicking above the wash-stand every time the ship began to straighten herself; my suitcase was knocking against the chest of drawers; a board in the deck-head creaked plaintively; at the head of my bunk the tins rolled to and fro in the cupboard of bonded stores. And, alarmed by this invisible life, imagination began to play with thoughts of danger. Hundreds of miles of wind and sea are battering an old hulk, eaten up with rust, driven by weak, defective engines. Now, there must be a limit

to the endurance of every ship: she can stand so much—say, a hundred thousand big waves, and no more. And, who knows? Perhaps the *Dewhurst* has stood her maximum already, perhaps the very next wave, the one which is rising a-starboard just now, will start the work of ultimate destruction. The force of water is terrific: it can twist a solid stanchion into knots, smash in three-inch boards as if they were thin glass, tear strong steel plates off the rivets, snap a rudder post. Should our rudder post break, the ship would be exposed broadside to the gale, and then. . . . There is that inward angle formed by the Chief's room amidships, a death-trap, as Harvey called it. It was smashed in once, some five years ago; should that happen now, when she is so much older and weaker. . . .

I pulled the string by which the electric switch could be controlled from my bunk, and turned on the light. In contrast to the furious motion one guessed outside, everything in the room was stationary—strangely so. Except for my trousers, which I had hung up on the curtain-rod above my feet. For a moment they hung straight down as trousers should; then a quiver seized them, they left their vertical position and rigidly, jerkily, as though overcoming a tremendous resistance, they swung higher and higher into an unnatural angle; then, with a fresh tremor, they came back to the vertical, crossed it, continued swinging to the other side into the same unnatural angle. The sight was amusing, but not for long; I soon had enough of it and put out the light. Whereupon, deprived of visual impressions, my thought turned inwards, and with magic swiftness slid back along that line of the past which culminated in my present journey. Petersburg; Lydia's room; an open suitcase on the floor and Lydia bending over it, while I watch her easy, graceful movements and

my heart is heavy, for she is going to England and I shall not see her for a long time. Again, the moonlit steps of the veranda on her estate; the heavy fragrance of roses; Lydia all in white, her beautiful eyes alive with pity; and I, kissing her long thin fingers, with despair crying in me: This is the end, the end. . . . Well, it was not the end. There was a war, a peace and a revolution; I married and was living in Newcastle, when one day there came a letter with a Finnish stamp and Lydia's inimitable handwriting: sprawling scarabs, multi-legged and legless, drawn up in a neat row; and with that letter our relationship started growing anew, this time undisturbed by longing and free from demand. More years passed, and I saw her at last. That was in Hull; she was standing under the grimy portico of the railway station craning her neck to find me in the crowd, and she flung up her arms when she noticed me. We walked for hours about the dreary, treeless Hull park; I looked into her grey eyes, and once more I was twenty-two and in love and trying to forget that I should lose her in a few hours. "We shall meet again," she said as we parted. "I know we shall because—because we have to." It seemed impossible, absolutely impossible. . . .

Twenty-five years ago, or ten years ago—somehow it made no difference, the memories were equally vivid, equally alive. Which means, of course, that emotional time depends only on the quality of the emotion and has nothing to do with astronomical facts. The deeper the emotion the slower its time, the stronger its resistance to death. Perhaps some emotions, the very deepest ones, are altogether immune from the action of time, so that even after the man has died they continue vibrating in the ether like sound-waves which roll on and on through space after the bell has been smashed. The Russian

priests say that the soul of the deceased hovers for six weeks in the neighbourhood of the death-bed. . . .

Feeling too drowsy to enjoy thinking, I tried to sleep. Unsuccessfully; for if I lay on my back my head would roll from side to side, and when I turned sideways the force of gravity buried my nose in the pillow every time the ship reached the maximum of her list. After a while I began to feel annoyed and restless. "Don't start fretting, accept the situation," warned the mind. But the body would not listen; it kept on stirring and tossing, it protested and willed me to sleep; and the more strongly it willed, the more aware I was of my discomfort, the more restless I felt. "Stop willing, relax," said the mind. "You know very well—you've written about it in your books—that any straining of the will makes it recoil against itself and achieves the exact opposite of what it is aiming at." Yes, of course, I know that, but how could I make that stupid body listen to reason? Anger had made it rebellious: whatever I might say, it persisted in contracting its muscles and sending a current of irritation along the nerves; it caught my thoughts and emotions in its wheels, broke them up, ground them out of shape. "To hell with your consciousness," it cried. "I want the whole of you to be my mouthpiece; I want you to complain and curse and gnash your teeth because that is how I feel." . . . No, that had to be stopped; it was high time I summoned my double, I ought to have thought of it long ago. Now then. . . .

A tremendous crash quite close to my head, a crash suggestive of collapsing bulkheads and falling masts, shattered my drowsy universe. I sat up, banging my crown against the boards of the upper berth, switched on the light, and stared in bewilderment at the floor. It had become alive, it was now a moving mass of tins, bottles

and packets. Pushing, overtaking and colliding with each other, as though each of them had a will of its own, they were shifting at an increasing speed towards the opposite bulkhead. There they piled up around the wash-stand in an untidy quivering heap; then as the ship began to right herself they rolled back towards my bunk. . . . How stupid of me! I had been warned that the door of the cupboard with the bonded stores was loose, but I had forgotten to barricade it. Damn!

I climbed out of the bunk, snatched a couple of bottles, shoved them into the cupboard and shut the door after them. I bent down to pick up some more, when the ship lurched backwards; missing my objective, I staggered against the painfully sharp corner of the chest of drawers, while the door of the cupboard, which I had failed to fasten, was flung open and the bottles escaped to join their zigzagging companions on the floor. I then changed my tactics: instead of moving about the room I held fast to my bunk with one hand and fished with the other for the bottles and tins as they came rolling past me. When all the cylindrical objects were immobilised on my bunk I proceeded to hunt after the non-rolling packets which had got marooned in the corners. Presently that, too, was done, and I passed on to the second part of the campaign, the transfer of the stores from the bunk into the cupboard—a surprisingly difficult task when the room is swinging in most unexpected directions and you have to keep one foot against the cupboard all the time. Still, I had managed to stow away almost everything when my foot slipped; the door burst open, and once more a thundering avalanche of bottles and packets poured out on to the floor.

By the time my work was completed I was sweating profusely, had three bruises on my body, had smashed a

bottle of lemonade and crushed a packet of jelly powder. But I fell asleep without the double's help.

It is afternoon. I stand on the bridge taking shelter behind the wheel-house from the fury of the wind. Now that the eye can see, the ear is less aware of the howling and booming of the gale. Low grey clouds cover the sky; grey white-crested waves advance in stolid, unhurried lines from the North. As they near the ship they seem to slow down and linger as though trying to pick out her weakest point. Then they strike; there is a hollow crash, the ship shakes, a sheet of spray flies over the deck with a vicious hiss. But more often she manages to dodge the blow: she gives a sudden lurch, and the attacking wave passes under her keel, re-emerging on the lee side with its back as smooth as glass, its dangerous crest flattened out into a fanciful patch of white foam. Whatever the poets may say, the spectacle is too monotonous to be beautiful; its fascination is not æsthetic, it comes not from lines or colours, but from the sense of power, the inexhaustible, incalculable power which has set a million square miles of the ocean into that angry motion. . . .

"Brr, it's cold," said a voice by my side.

The first mate, now on watch, has slipped over to my shelter to have a rest from the wind. He was a typical Nordic, with a long bony face and pale blue eyes which looked sleepy when he was silent and lit up with kindness when he began to talk—or curse. He stood leaning against the bulkhead with his shoulders hunched up, stamping with his feet and rubbing his hands.

"You ought to have put on your sou'wester or something," I said.

"Too much bother," he grumbled. "Damn this weather!"

I always found it difficult to talk to him, for, unlike Harvey and the third mate, he would not forget that I belonged to a different world from his, and felt constrained with me. He would cast off that constraint when wound up, and become voluble and at ease; but the trouble was that I never knew how to wind him up.

"You would call this a moderate gale, I suppose," I ventured. "Force eight?"

"Mm, eight or seven. Seven I should say."

The subject clearly did not interest him. Seven or eight or eleven—probably after twenty years' service the difference ceased to matter. What else could I ask him?

"Could you give me one of your cigarettes?" he said. "I've left mine downstairs."

"Certainly." I produced the box.

"Thanks."

For a while we smoked in silence. Then he pricked up his ears.

"There! He's out again," he grumbled angrily, his blue eyes lighting up with kindness. "As obstinate as a mule."

I listened and caught a human sound making its way through the howling of the gale, the sound of a dry bronchial cough coming up from below, from the Captain's bridge.

"Why the hell doesn't he stay in bed?" continued the mate. "He knows perfectly well we can manage without him, so what's the point?"

The Captain had started the voyage with bad bronchitis, but when we ran into a fog off the Cornish coast he had come out and stood on the bridge all through the night. His cough had naturally got worse after that,

and for four days he had been lying on the sofa in a comatose state drinking gallons of hot tea. And now he was out again.

"You ought to speak to him," said the mate, as a new paroxysm of coughing reached our ears. "He won't listen to us, perhaps he will to you."

"I have spoken already, but he said: 'It's all right, we never get ill at sea.'"

"Oh, don't we? I remember when I was on the *Shamstone*, a sister ship of this one. . . ." He suddenly broke off and pointed southward. "See there, a steamer? Looks like a tanker to me."

He staggered forward—for the ship was rolling more heavily than ever—took the telescope out of its case, and steadied it against a stanchion.

"Yes, a tanker, a big one," he commented in that expressionless, dreamy-sounding voice in which for some reason everybody speaks when looking through an optical instrument. "Must be heading for Gib. For Seenyor Mussolini, I suppose. Want to have a look?"

I had a look, out of politeness rather than curiosity, returned the telescope to its case, and hurried back from the wind to the shelter of the wheel-house. The mate stood fidgeting restlessly, with a strained look in his eyes. He was only happy when working, preferably with his hands, and on watch there is practically nothing one can do. Out of his pocket he extracted an adjustable screw-driver and started turning it in his fingers.

"Ever seen one like that?" he asked. "Very handy. I had one before, but lost it. Left it lying on the winch amidships and an hour later it was gone. One of the Chief's men must have pinched it. Good steel." He lovingly stroked the narrow blade with his strong, knotty thumb.

As he was obviously expecting sympathy, I remarked that the steel seemed to be excellent indeed. But I could not think of anything else to say on the subject of a screw-driver, so I asked how many miles we had done in the last watch.

"Twenty-three," he answered indifferently, still fingering the screw-driver.

"Twenty-three only? Even less than the watch before? Why is that?"

He shrugged his shoulders. Since it was not in his power to alter the mileage, it did not interest him. I tried again.

"Have they finished washing number one hold?" I asked.

"Not by a long chalk," he grumbled. "And they never will, if this weather lasts . . . Oh, she's a bloody nuisance, she is!" he exploded all of a sudden. "It's a disgrace to let her go abroad. Now look here"—he turned squarely towards me and spoke prodding the air vehemently with the screw-driver. "Before—say fifteen years ago—when we saw a filthy boat we knew she was Greek or Spanish or some other Dago. And now when we see one she's as often British as not. Nice, eh? What I say is this: there ought to be a law compelling every shipowner to sail for at least six months on his ships. That would make them realise what it feels like to take an old tub like this one to a foreign port. They say: It's your job to keep her clean. That's all very well to say, but how the devil can we keep her clean if we haven't got enough men and not enough paint? There isn't even a carpenter on board—economy, you see—so I have to do all the carpentering myself. Yes, and then they'd also realise the conditions we live in. You come down to my room and feel my mattress, just feel it. It's soaking wet about my feet, and

it'll be wet all through up to the pillow if this swell continues. It's rust: it gets between the sheets of the bulkhead and forces them apart, so that they let water through. And it's been like that for two years. Twice I complained to the superintendent—that old swine Conney—but all he said was: 'We'll see to it next time.' And, of course, the next time never comes . . . I tell you, we don't mind hard work, we don't even mind low pay, but we do mind being treated like that. No consideration, none at all, that's what hurts. We spend half our time in the tropics, but we have no electric fans and no mosquito netting. There is no running water—and on Scandinavian ships you'll find hot and cold water-taps even in the crew's quarters. Or take the buckets, those we have under the wash-basins. They are ordinary zinc, and in the tropics they get green with mildew and stink like hell. But when the Old Man asked for enamelled ones, do you know what the superintendent said to him? 'You'll soon want silver buckets,' he said. Nice, isn't it? . . . And look at the way the men are housed. Been to their quarters yet?"

"No."

"You should go there to-day when they're having their evening meal, with the wet clothes hanging all over the place and not enough room for one to turn round. And that's where they are supposed to rest and eat and do everything. I tell you, pigs are kept better than they are. I've lived on a farm, I know. It's a shame."

We both ducked instinctively as a sheet of spray flew over our heads. "That's a good one," he muttered with approval, then he continued:

"And the food! In the poorest boarding-houses ashore—and I've stayed in some lousy ones—they wouldn't dare to give you the stuff we get here. Bad times, they say.

Don't you believe it: the times can't be so very bad considering that Mr. John Tweedy has just given a Rolls-Royce to his daughter for her birthday. I know that from my in-laws, they have a farm next to his place in Lancashire. So Mr. John Tweedy buys Rolls-Royces and we have to eat muck . . . But you know yourself what the food here is like."

I certainly did know. For five days I have been living on a diet of bread, tea, marmalade and jam. The rest was so horrible as to be practically or quite uneatable: stringy meat which consisted mostly of sinews; puddings made without milk; tinned salt butter tasting so rancid that only two of us—the Captain and Sparks—could touch it; bacon, bluish-grey, as hard as wood; salt pork, third-grade, the sort of thing which the buccaneers of old might have considered as food, but which really came under the heading of manure. No eggs, no coffee, no cocoa, and a microscopic allowance of milk, for tea only. There was no refrigerator on board, only a defective old ice-box which saturated the whole passage with an evil smell; the lid did not fit, so the ice only kept for a fortnight, and on long voyages the mates had to eat tinned stuff for twenty or thirty days. . . . That this state of affairs should be possible in a civilised country in the year of grace 1937 is still beyond my comprehension.

"I should like to get hold of one of those chaps," continued the mate with suppressed ferocity, "who write all that rubbish about the glamour and the romance of the sea. Glamour my foot! I'd just put him on this old hooker for a couple of years, that would make him shut up, believe me. Glamour indeed!"

I asked him whether the same conditions prevailed on other tramps.

"Yes, on most," he said. "A bit better on some, a bit

worse on others, but there isn't much choice. Now take the American Marine—there, if the men don't get different jam for breakfast every day they complain to their Union and their Union declares a strike. Or take the Finns. I had lunch once on a Finnish boat, and . . .”

He broke off and stared frowning at the fo'c'sle. “Hullo, what's that?” he muttered. “Now what the devil . . . ?”

I could not see anything wrong, but the next moment he was rushing, or rather sliding down the ladder.

The saloon. It is seven o'clock. The boy clears the table and takes off the white tablecloth, thus laying bare the green cloth cover, very shabby, full of holes and large discoloured patches. With the white cloth off, the room looks dark, particularly since the electric light is weak to-day: the dynamo is not working properly. The third mate and I are smoking at the two ends of the long table.

The steward strolls in, a broad-shouldered, thick-set man of sixty, with a shaven bullet-shaped head, the face of a surly bulldog and a swagger in his gait: acrobats walk like that when approaching the trapeze. He always comes into the saloon at this hour for a chat, and the third mate is always there, on the same chair, in the same position, with one leg thrown over the other.

“Ekhh!” the steward groans as he gingerly lowers himself on to the sofa. His age makes him feel entitled to be on a footing of equality with the mates, at least with the two younger ones. “Old bones. Stuffed with rheumatism. Here, and here.” He rubs various parts of his body and grimaces with pain.

For some time he rumbles on about his rheumatism,

then shakes his head mournfully, lights a cigarette and puffs at it, staring angrily at the cracked mirror over the mantelshelf. "That b—— of a cook," he mutters, addressing no one in particular, "d'you know what he did to-day? I told him to clean the place, 'cos it was worse than a pigsty, so all he did was to sprinkle some mucking powder on the floor and pour a bucketful of water over it. He calls that cleaning, eh? These youngsters are no good, no good at all."

His soliloquy follows the usual programme. First, he swears at the cook and then the cabin-boy—who as a matter of fact is a nice, hard-working youth; then at the ship, then at everything connected with the ship: the bloody Union, the mucking shipowners, the Board of Trade, and all the masters he has ever served with—all except Captain Leith, the present Master. Since he talks in some Northern dialect and keeps his lips tightly compressed, I can only get the gist of his speech—if I try to. But I am not trying: the constant repetition of the same unprintable adjectives and the monotonous bitterness of Old Jack's remarks irritate me, and as I do not want to be irritated I make myself deaf and watch the slowly-shifting level of water in the jug before me. If you forget the cause of that shifting it looks like magic. Then I think that I have been on board the ship for five days doing absolutely nothing except for a few hours' steering; that I have not read or written one line, have not spoken a word for hours on end, and yet have not felt bored, not for one moment. That, I say to myself, is good: it means that I am beginning to control my intellect.

A bell rings in the passage, and the steward, breaking off in the middle of a sentence, jumps up with an alacrity one would not expect of his flabby body. "The Captain," he informs us, with a note of naïve satisfaction in his

voice, trying to impress upon us the intimate connection existing between him and the Master of the ship. He squares his shoulders and, with his swaggering gait, goes up the inner alley-way leading towards the Captain's room.

"A funny chap," says the third mate, a good-looking youth of twenty-three, with a strong chin, the complexion of a schoolgirl, and curly black hair. He is stiffer in his deportment and his speech than the other mates, and tries to keep himself neat and tidy, a difficult task amidst the general shabbiness.

"Yes, he is funny," I agree—insincerely, since I do not like Old Jack, and find him boring and unpleasant..

I look at the mate and he looks at me. I am wondering why he bears with the steward's senile babbling, and he seems to read my question.

"The fellow must have someone to talk to," he says, half-apologetically. "They get like that when they're old."

"They do. Is he honest?"

"Oh, absolutely." The mate is frankly pleased at my being prepared to hear something favourable about the steward. "Of course, he gets his commission from the purveyors—that's a tradition—but he never cheats us or the men as other stewards do. And he's really devoted to the Captain; he's been with him for nine years—stuck to him through thick and thin."

It appears that this embittered old cynic has a touching affection for Captain Leith. These last nights, for instance, when the Captain was ill, Old Jack used to get up every hour to make tea and change the hot-water bottle, all of his own accord. Two years ago, when the Captain took a long leave after double pneumonia, the steward had left the service. He had gone to Hull and opened a little tea-room near the docks. His business had prospered, and as his customers were mostly seamen,

he did not lose contact with the sea and felt happy. But one day he heard that Captain Leith had resumed the command of the *Dewhurst* and was looking for a steward. That was enough for Old Jack; he sold his shop for a song and went back to the ship.

"Has he any children," I ask, the words Thwarted Paternity flitting through my mind.

"No. He was married, but his wife ran away with a musician." The mate chuckled. "You should hear him talk about women, it's a treat."

We smoke in silence. The mate is a studious youth, so the best way to make him open up is to question him on some nautical subject. That is what I do; I ask him why a ship rolls more heavily in ballast than when she is loaded.

"More heavily isn't really the right word," he says. "You see it's like this."

From the sofa he picks up an old envelope which has been lying there since the day of our departure, and on the face of it draws the cross-section of a ship.

"Suppose her centre of gravity is here . . . you know what the centre of gravity is? Very well then, there is also the so-called metacentre. You know what buoyancy is?"

"Buoyancy? *Plovuchest*?"

"Eh?"

"It's Russian for buoyancy. I remember listening to some lectures about it when I was a sailor in the Black Sea Squadron. But that was twenty-eight years ago, I've forgotten everything."

He explains the meaning of the words buoyancy and metacentre; he talks about component forces and resultants; he makes the ship on the envelope capsize and rights her out; he loads her and jettisons the cargo; he adds bilge keels and shifts the water ballast first one way

then another. My original question, which seemed so simple, overgrows with subsidiary questions, swells into a complex problem. I understand his explanations less and less, yet I go on enjoying the lecture, not because I share his enthusiasm for buoyancy, but because of the feeling of comradeship which our common preoccupation brings about between us.

"I think I've got it more or less," I say optimistically, when he has finished. "Now there is another thing I wanted to ask you. Why do they make the decks concave and not convex, as on submarines? Would not a convex deck make the ship stronger?"

"Oh no." He shakes his head, turns the envelope inside out, and draws another cross-section of a ship. "You see, you have to consider the resistance. . . ."

In the middle of his explanations the steward comes down. He looks graver than before, almost solemn—the after-glow of his communion with the Master. He settles in the corner of the sofa and drums his fingers, waiting with frank impatience for an opportunity to have his say. As soon as the mate has finished he steps in.

"Science!" he sniffs sarcastically, nodding at the envelope. "I'll tell you what, gentlemen, this bloody science of yours is no good. It'll destroy civilisation, that's what it'll do. Take electricity, for instance. People don't know what to do with electricity, so they kill each other with it. Mucking murder I call it. I knew a fellow, he was a pilot in the air, and a smart one, an ace, as they call 'em and he told me they had invented . . ."

I cease to listen and think my own thoughts. When I hear him again he is talking about lavatories, this being a contemptuous distortion of the word "laboratories."

"They cost millions, and what's the use of them, I ask you? All those b—rs, the professors, do is to look

through microscopes at some bugs and draw high salaries, so that they can buy cars and drive about. Aah,"—he grotesquely imitates the mannered drawl of an imaginary professor—"Aah, let's drive down to Brighton, Aah, and have a couple of leequeueers. Yes, Mister"—for some reason he turns to me, whom he ignores as a rule—"I'm telling you the truth. They've got thousands of lavatories all over the country, but they can't even cure an or'nary rheumatism like mine, and that's a bloody reelastic fact. Professors! I wish one of them professors came to our galley and had a look at the mucking food we eat. But catch them coming here! Their noses are too refined." He twists his nose in an attempt to give it a refined appearance. "Sahvoy Grill, that's what they like, the bastards! Oh I know what science is, I've read books . . ."

The mate glances at the clock. It is seven forty-five; his watch begins in a quarter of an hour. The steward realises that he is about to lose the better half of his audience and makes a conversational spurt.

"Yes, sir!" he shouts, banging his palm on the shabby tablecloth. "That's what's wrong with the country: professors and politicians. Er, ladies and gentlemen"—he gets up and bows right and left with a saturnine grin—"I'm the Premier of His Majesty's Government, a working man like yourselves, hee—hee. And I'm telling you, ladies and gentlemen"—he thunders suddenly—"that it's most emperative that our Empire should breed heroes. Yes, ladies and gentleman, our great country needs bloody heroes. . . . Oh, Mr. Tweedy" (he beams with friendliness), "I'm delighted to shake your hand, your heroic hand. Had a nice trip to the Leedoh? Seen the whorehouses there? How bloody delightful! No, Mr. Tweedy, we, His Majesty's Government, won't bother you about those men of yours. We know you are father and mother

to the bastards, and if they ever dare to complain against you we will——” (a long unprintable sentence). “What did you say? Ten per cent reduction in wages? Oh, how kind of you, Mr. Tweedy; that’s just what our Empire wants. But why not make it fifteen? We won’t mind, ladies and gentlemen, will we? We know Mr. Tweedy is a great man, so why should we mind? We’ve other things to think about, we must get on breeding heroes, so let’s . . .”—the rest is unprintable again.

The mate must go now. I see relief in his glance as he gets up, relief at having fulfilled a tedious duty.

“Well, I’m afraid it’s time,” he mutters, putting the cigarettes in his pocket and buttoning his jacket. “Are you taking the wheel to-night?” he asks me.

“Yes.”

“Aren’t you tired of it?”

“Not at all. I love it.”

He raises his eyebrows: it seems funny to him that anyone should love steering. But I also feel that he approves of this queer taste of mine.

The ocean has calmed down. Looking into the distance one gets the illusion of a solid lava-like substance under the clouded sky, with long sinuous tracks—strips of slightly-ruffled surface—running in various directions. Nearer the ship one notices that the lava-like substance has a perpetual motion—the Atlantic is never quite still—a slow lazy heaving, as though a herd of huge grey pachyderms were wallowing close beneath the surface.

I am washing my clothes on the deck by the foremast. Two buckets, one with hot, one with cold water. I plunge the article into hot water, then I soap it and scrub

it, conscientiousness and strength serving in lieu of knowledge. My long woollen pants give me a lot of trouble. When soaked they turn into a long unwieldy snake; while I am scrubbing one end, the other slips out and plops down on the deck, and since the deck is covered with coal-dust I have to wash the pants all over again. There is a sound of giggling above me, and on raising my head I see the Captain and Harvey watching me from the bridge.

"Hard work, eh?" says the Captain. He is a tall, powerfully-built man of forty-five, with a handsome, strong face and steady, unusually lustrous eyes which, when he looks at me, always make me feel younger and smaller than I am. Just now they twinkle with amusement.

"Yes, very hard," I call back, as I struggle with the serpentine tendencies of my pants.

"Why not hold one end with your teeth?" suggests the mate sympathetically.

"Or fasten it to the aerial," adds the Captain. (The aerial is thirty feet above the deck.)

After the pants I tackle my shirt. The pants are mine, that is to say I bought them myself; the shirt was given me by somebody, I cannot remember by whom; and so were the trousers I have on, and my working suit, and all my neckties. There was a time when I found it difficult and even painful to accept things from my friends, but that was long ago, when the words Gentleman and Pride had some meaning for me, the conventional meaning. . . .

"Mind the inside of the collar," says the mate. "There is always some dirt left there."

This is good advice, as I realise after wringing out the shirt. The stuff, where it touches my neck, is still dirty, and I have to soap it again.

"You know how the second mate washes his clothes?"

asks the Captain. "He carries them in his pocket for a month or so, then he rinses them and they're clean. Isn't it so, Mr. Harvey?"

Harvey beams. Like the other mates, he has a deep affection for Captain Leith, and I heard him say once: "Were it not for the Old Man I wouldn't stay with this company for another day."

I have not got much to wash. When I have hung my clothes on the line I take the bucket with the dirty water and pour it overboard.

"Hey, hey!" cries an alarmed voice from the bridge. "Look out, man!"

"What's the matter?"

"Your socks! You've thrown them out with the water. There they are floating! There!"

"Damn!"

As usual, the body is quicker than the mind: although I cannot possibly retrieve my socks I make a dash to the railings and look down. I see a lot of water and a few brown patches of Sargasso weed, but no trace of the socks. When I lift my head the Captain and Harvey are grinning broadly. It must be a standard joke amongst seamen.

Two days later the weather improved and they started shifting coal. Some five hundred tons of it had to be moved from the hold into the bunkers.

On a narrow platform, four boards wide, erected amidships over the gaping hatch stands the bo'sun, an athletically-built young man with an inordinately long nose and screwed-up eyes, which give his face a feminine look. (It is surprising how often one comes across feminine features in the faces of seamen, old and young.)

A fresh breeze is blowing, the ship rolls. Balancing on the platform, the bo'sun catches the heavy basket of coal as it comes up from the hold and with a deft jerk sends it to the other edge of the platform, where he tips it over. A cloud of dust flies up; two hundredweights of coal crash down to the bottom of the bunker; the bo'sun detaches the empty basket from the wire rope and flings it back into the darkness of the hold, where black-faced men with white eyeballs pick it up and start filling it anew, whilst another basket is being hoisted up. No verbal orders are given; the speed of the winch at which one of the mates is sitting, is regulated by the bo'sun's beckoning finger, which slows down as the basket rises nearer the top. Economy of effort.

"Isn't it dangerous?" I ask Harvey as I watch the bo'sun's pirouettes on the platform. A fall to one side would mean death, to the other, a broken limb.

"Oh no, it's all right, they've a sort of instinct"—Harvey drawls composedly. "Besides, if he loses his balance he can always catch the rope. . . . Wouldn't you like to go down and do some shovelling?"

I had been watching the men below, and I know that their job is not as simple as one might think. To shovel coal is hard work anyway, and here you have to stand on a steep slope propping up the basket with your knee and at the same time balancing so as to counteract the rolling of the ship.

"No. I'm afraid I shouldn't be of any use there," I said.

There is another thought at the back of my mind: I might ruin my trousers and my shoes by contact with the sharp-edged lumps of coal, and that I cannot afford.

"I was only joking," says Harvey; "it's a filthy job, anyway. And we shouldn't really do it. We are seamen, not miners."

"Do the men dislike it?"

"They hate it. But you know what they are like: they get a glass of rum and that keeps them quiet."

Two ounces of cheap, sticky rum as a compensation for four hours' strenuous dirty work on top of the ten hours constituting the normal working day! I accept the fact without understanding the psychology of it.

"Oh, the wind has veered," observes Harvey, glancing up at the smoke from the funnel. "That's bad."

"Why?"

"It'll veer to north-east, and then we'll get all that dust flying into the house."

"We are in an anticyclone now, aren't we?"

"Yes."

"An anticyclone is when the wind goes anti-clockwise?"

"No, it's the other way round: clockwise. So we must be getting out of the anticyclone." Noticing that I do not understand, he pulls me by the sleeve. "Come along, I'll show you."

We go to the chart-room, where he delivers a lecture on meteorology. It is very interesting and simple—at least in principle. You note the reading of your barometer, the force of the wind and its direction; then, by wireless, you get the corresponding data from other ships in your section of the ocean and put them all down on a chart; after which you have only to trace the lines of low and high pressure and it becomes clear what part of the weather system you are in.

The lecture over, Harvey settles down to correct the charts, and I go to the foredeck to take exercise. The sun has come out, and one feels its heat in sheltered places: the change of latitude begins to tell. The visibility is perfect, the horizon seems quite close. From the Captain's bridge I hear the sound of coughing; it is much softer

now. The starling which landed on the windlass in the morning has gone; either it has flown away, or Ginger, the ship's cat, has killed it. I see Ginger sitting by the winch, motionless, snugly collected, his head turned up hopefully, as though he were waiting for another starling to land. I respect cats, for they have managed to keep the primitive wisdom of the wilds through thousands of years of domestication, and they still observe the fundamental law of animate nature, which the dog, let alone man, has forgotten: Waste not energy. The cat acts when action is necessary: it fights, it stalks birds, it runs from danger. But once the need for action has passed, it relaxes completely, absolutely. Hence the peculiar air of composure and cosiness about a resting cat; there is not an ounce of strain left in its muscles; it is in a state of pure contemplation, with the valves of its emotion shut tight; unlike a dog, it does not get excited when you pass by or call it—it simply ignores you. And because it knows how to save energy it has kept all its instincts as alive as the deer or the tiger have; and strong instincts mean a full life, the right life. . . .

I turn away from the cat and resume pacing up and down the iron deck, which in the meantime has been warmed by the sun. Suddenly, with a shock, I remember what I am. A writer! Heavens! I visualise the eight books I have written—they occupy half a shelf in our drawing-room—and, as happened to me last summer when I was gazing at the *aiguilles* of Mont Blanc, these eight books shrink in my mind to a pin-point. Against the background of the present moment—the sun, the breeze, the racing dolphin on the weatherside, and the hard work that is going on around me—they lose all meaning, turn into a heap of paper, a jumble of words. If I had not written them the present moment would have been the

same, neither richer nor poorer. And I also should have been the same—probably more lively than I am, with more zest for life, less impatient with people. Certainly healthier, without that stiffness in my limbs, the outcome of eight sedentary years. Probably more interesting as a conversationalist, for then I would not, as I do now, jealously reserve my most promising thoughts for my books.

Then I think of *Mara the Gypsy*, my last novel, which I delivered to my publishers just before my departure. Selling stuff, they thought, and so did I. Fast moving, packed with incident, humorous and light enough to be understood by any shop-girl. Genuine, too, since I had got the character of the heroine and many details of her milieu from a gypsy; probably the first genuine novel about gypsies since Merimée's and George Borrow's. And yet, will it sell? It ought to, but will it? I wish it sold five thousand copies. I could then engage a char-woman and give Nadya a rest from drudgery. Well, it may sell that. If I get to the fo'c'sle-head before that crested wave touches the ship, *Mara* will sell five thousand—or more. But I must not quicken my step, that would be cheating. I must walk at the same speed. . . .

Fool! Idiot! There I am again at this childish game of "Omens." I have been playing it for forty years. Whenever I badly want something to happen I cast round for a favourable augury: my wish will be fulfilled if that bird flies away, or if my lighter works at the first go, or if the next car has an even number. A stupid game, and a harmful habit, harmful because it is prompted by fear and feeds fear at the expense of emotional energy. A few years ago, I, with the help of my double, started fighting that habit, and I have almost succeeded in eradicating it. But not quite; it comes up now and again when I am

off my guard, as it has done just now. Do other people play that silly game, I wonder? Perhaps they don't, but they certainly indulge in fear just as much as I do. I say: "If this wave doesn't hit the ship, my book will sell." And they say: "Oh, I wish my book would sell, I wish, I wish!" Our formulæ are different, but the psychological process is the same: fear of the future causing an emotional strain, which in turn leads to waste of vitality. That is what the wise cat does not do. The cat is a realist, it deals with things as they come, and won't be ruffled by imaginary possibilities. If the cat were conscious it would say: Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. . . .

I feel cross with myself, and the pleasure I have been getting from the sun, the sea and my own company wanes. I go up on to the bridge, find Harvey, who in the meantime has finished correcting the charts, and begin to question him about English nautical swear-words. They are very few in number: two adjectives, one verb and two nouns. "Bastard" is by far the worst of the lot: if preceded by the qualification "Whore's," it usually leads to a fight.

"Swearing again, mate?"

The Captain has come upon us from behind. He stands with his hands in his pockets, his cap jauntily askew, a humorous spark gleaming in his strong eyes. The mate grins.

"No, sir, I wasn't swearing, I was only explaining to him."

"Explaining! It didn't sound like explaining . . . I hope he didn't shock you, Mr. Gabbsky."

"I'm not easily shocked," I say. "I was in the Russian navy, you know." And as he does not see the implication: "They're great at swearing in the Russian navy."

"Are they?" This sceptically from Harvey.

"Oh yes. They're artists, they swear in scenes and pictures."

"How do you mean?"

"They'll take, let's say, your grandmother, a coil of rope, and a camel, and produce the most fantastic situations and combinations with the three of them."

"As for instance?" The Captain is deeply interested.

"I wasn't good at it in Russian, and it simply can't be done in English . . . I remember one day we new recruits were rowing round the flagship with the admiral standing on the poop and watching us. Our rowing was rotten, so rotten that when we were still a quarter of a mile away he started swearing at the top of his voice. We reached the poop, we turned round the poop—a slow business that was, because our oars got mixed up—and we rowed away from the poop; and all the time he kept on swearing. Without repeating himself once, mind you. I remember after the drill we gathered together and wrote down the combinations and situations he had treated us to: there was a long list of them. Yes, I'm afraid in this respect the Russian navy is decidedly superior to the British."

The Captain and Harvey look a little uneasy. They do not know how to take my concluding remark. They feel it is up to them to restore the prestige of the British navy; but how?

"Well, I knew a man, he was chief on the *Preston*," begins the Captain. But, honesty prevailing, he corrects himself: "No, it wasn't quite the same thing, because he did repeat himself. All the same his swearing was strong enough, I can tell you. . . . They say the Greeks are good at it."

"Yes. They have a curious way of spicing their swear-

ing with religion: the cross comes in, and the baptismal font, and the Virgin Mary. . . . That reminds me of what my son said once as a scripture lesson when he was ten or so. The master asked him who Mary and Martha were and he answered: 'Mary was a virgin, but I don't know about Martha.' "

They both laugh; the Captain in a deep rumbling bass, Harvey noiselessly, with his eyes and his shoulders.

"They are monkeys, these boys," says the Captain, and his eyes grow softer: he too has a son at home. "The ideas they get. . . ."

Harvey is going to say something, but checks himself. At sea it is bad form for a young officer to be talkative in the presence of the Master. Also Harvey feels—and so do I—that the Captain is about to tell us a story. We are not mistaken.

"I had a friend when I was at school," he begins; "Reggie Bradley was his name, and a very clever boy he was. He wrote poetry, and played the fiddle like a grown-up, and knew the names of all birds and bugs. A brainy chap. His father was a respectable man, a Wesleyan and a strict teetotaller. Now one evening when I was at Reggie's—we used to do our homework together—he showed me one of those planchette things and said: 'Let's have a go.' So we put our hands on it. We didn't know what to ask, and all Reggie could think of was: 'Tell us where Dad is just now.' And then the planchette thing spelt out: 'Drinking at the "Wheatsheaf," ' which was a pub at the other end of the town. That was nonsense, of course, because we knew that Pa Bradley spent all his evenings at the Wesleyan chapel, where they had meetings. And then Ma Bradley came in and Reggie said to her: 'D'you know where Daddy is to-night? At the "Wheatsheaf," drinking hard.' She got cross with him ..

then. 'Who told you such nonsense?' she asked, and when he told her it was the planchette, she said: 'I shall throw the filthy thing away or you'll go quite batty.' And d'you know, a little later they found out that Pa Bradley had never gone near his Wesleyans, but used to go to the 'Wheatsheaf' instead, and drink with his mistress. . . . Isn't that queer?"

"It is," I agree, although thought-reading always seemed to me less queer than wireless. "And what became of the boy?"

"Reggie? He died the same year of T.B.: he had weak lungs. Then his mother died, and then Pa Bradley married that mistress of his. She was a regular bitch: she slept with a dozen men and Pa Bradley was the only one in the town who didn't know it."

The story does not call for any comment, so we keep silent for a while and look at the sea, sapphire blue and snow white under the bright warm sun.

"That's a bit nicer than a gale, eh?" says the Captain to me.

"I should think so."

"Your cough seems to be better, sir," observes Harvey.

"Oh, it's quite all right now. I knew it would pass soon. . . . Well, gentlemen, if you'll excuse me I'll go and tinker with my wireless for a bit. . . . Keep her sharp-end forward," he throws over his shoulder to Harvey.

"I'll try, sir," says Harvey with a wide grin.

All three mates had a great admiration for Captain Leith. Judging by what they told me about him, he was a splendid man, decent all through, almost quixotically

so, level-headed, considerate, and a first-rate seaman. Therefore, when one evening he asked me to have a glass of port with him I felt honoured. I knew he was critical in his relationships, friendly on the surface with everybody, but essentially reserved in the way northerners are. So far we had hardly spoken at all, except at meals; but several times I had noticed him watch me on the sly, sizing me up. His invitation, I decided, did not come from indiscriminating conviviality, but indicated personal approval; hence my feeling of pride.

At first our talk was rather stiff and formal. I asked him when he expected to arrive at Houston; he asked me how I proposed to go from Houston to Mexico City. Then he showed me the wireless-set he was tinkering with (all these days I had heard him hammering in his room, which was right above mine). It was work for work's sake, because no sooner was the wireless ready than he would find it was not good enough, take it to pieces, and start anew. "We captains must have a hobby," he explained with a shy smile. "Otherwise we take to drinking. Ours is a lonesome job, you know."

That gave me the opening I was looking for.

"Why is it," I ventured, "that the captain always keeps aloof from the mates? Is it just tradition or is it necessary for discipline?"

"Don't know." He shrugged his massive shoulders. "On French ships, for instance, and on Italian too, there isn't much difference between the captain and the mates; they live the same life. But I wonder whether that would do on ours. I wonder. . . . Another glass?"

I hate port, so at first I said: "No, thank you," then, anxious to have our talk unstiffened, I corrected myself: "Half a glass, please." He gave me a full one.

Gradually, I succeeded in winding him up, and he came

forth with a couple of stories. He told them in the same loose meandering way in which all seafaring men speak, with many digressions and a wealth of unimportant details. The particular story which I am giving here had a definite ending, but no beginning: it had emerged spontaneously and rather unexpectedly out of a rambling discourse on the Chinese in general.

“ . . . They say in the books that the Chinese are poor eaters who can do with a handful of rice. Perhaps they can when they are badly paid and can't afford better food, but if you pay them proper wages they eat a good deal more than our men. I remember once we were in Shanghai ready to sail for Marseilles—that was during the war, and we had signed on nine or ten Chinks—when a pinnacle came alongside piled six-feet deep with chickens and onions and cabbages and what not. ‘Who's that for?’ I asked and the mate said it was private stuff for the Chinks, which they had bought with their own money, to supplement the ship's rations. I tell you there was enough in that boat to feed the crew of a battle-cruiser. Yes, they eat a tremendous lot. And they know good food from bad. When we were at sea their cook used to bring me some of their dishes, and jolly good they were. But I couldn't eat anything which had chicken in it, because I knew how they kill the chicken: they hold it up by the legs, alive, and plunge it into boiling water.

“That cook of theirs was a curious chap. Clever he was and well educated—his English was as good as yours or mine. One day I said—just to test him—that he didn't look a cook at all, but he pretended not to understand me. ‘Oh no, I am a cook, I've always been a cook,’ he said. That was eyewash, of course—he must have been something quite different.

“Well, a few days after we had left Shanghai, a big bird

settled on the foremast—a sort of duck, only twice the size. It was a nuisance, because it stayed there day after day, white-washing the deck which we had just painted. So I decided to shoot it and got my pump-gun. . . . You don't know what a pump-gun is? A kind of air-gun which you load by pumping it up, on the bicycle-pump principle. Japanese make and very powerful. I loaded it with scatter-shot and fired at the duck, but the thing only turned its head from side to side and looked surprised. The Chinese cook saw that and laughed. So I went to my room and pumped the gun as hard as I could, helping myself with a fifty-six pound weight: I was making a dolls'-house for my daughter then and the weight came in handy as a press. I shoved a bullet into the gun and this time I shot the bird all right; the bullet went clean through it. The cook said it was uneatable, so I threw it overboard. And then the cook said:

“ ‘You have a powerful gun, sir, but you couldn't kill me with it.’

“ ‘Oh yes, I could,’ I said, but he only grinned.

“ ‘No, sir, you couldn't. Not unless I wanted to be killed.’

“I told him not to be a fool, because his wanting or not wanting had nothing to do with the gun.

“ ‘Yes, it has,’ he said, ‘just try. Have a shot now.’ But I said I had no intention of being had up for murder and went back to my room.

“That night, as I was going over the accounts, I suddenly felt someone was behind me, and when I turned I saw cook standing on the door-step, with a cleaver in one hand and a huge carving-knife in the other. I must say I drew back, but he only grinned at me, quite friendly.

“ ‘It's all right, sir,’ he said, ‘I just came to show you something. Only you must swear not to tell anyone,

because if my countrymen knew about it my life would be in danger.'

" 'Why is that?' I asked.

" 'I can't tell you,' he said.

" 'All right, I promise,' I said.

"But that wasn't enough for him.

" 'Swear,' he repeated, and I had to swear.

"Then he said:

" 'Now that you've sworn by your God, I'll show you.'

"He shut his eyes, stood still for a few moments, and then of a sudden started hitting his chest with the cleaver and the carving-knife, alternately, you know. He was striking with the sharp ends too, I could see that, and big thumping blows they were, he was hitting out with all his might. And all he had on was an open-necked singlet of cheap Indian stuff, such as you buy in Bombay for a shilling. He must have hit himself at least twenty times, then he opened his eyes and stood panting and sweating: I could see the drops falling from his forehead. I went up to him and had a look at him. The singlet had a lot of tiny cuts where he had hit himself, but there was not one drop of blood on his body, only some reddish lines, like scratches. I handled his knife—it was as sharp as a razor.

" 'How the devil do you do that?' I asked, and he said he couldn't tell me because I wouldn't understand.

" 'So you see now,' he said, 'why I can't be killed if I don't want to be. And in case I'm attacked when I'm not prepared for it I have this.'

"From his pocket he drew a shirt, made of silk, which was like shantung, only whiter, and when I fingered it, I found it consisted of three very thin layers. He asked me to test its strength, so I put the shirt against a case, pumped my gun till it wouldn't go any farther and fired

across the room, a distance of five yards or so. There was a bang, a splinter of wood was flung against the bulk-head, but the shirt was intact. . . . Well, you may explain it as you like, I'm only telling you what happened. For all I know that cook may have been a fakir or one of those Yogi chaps, although if he was, I don't see what the other Chinks could have against him.

"Well, we were in the Indian Ocean, and one evening I was walking on the foredeck—I always take some exercise before turning in—when Cook came up to me and asked me in a whisper: 'Are you sure, sir, you haven't told anybody about what I showed you?' I said I hadn't, and then he said: 'Remember, you swore.' I was just going to tell him not to be impertinent, when he glanced round and dashed off.

"The next morning there was a gale, and I was woken up early, at seven, by the jug of water I had by my bunk falling off the table. I got out of bed to pick it up, and then I noticed something white on the Nestlé case. Now, I never leave my things lying about, so I wondered what it could be and picked it up. It was Cook's shirt, the one I'd been shooting at—I even found the trace my bullet had left on it. That made me angry: what the hell did the chap mean by slinking into my room at night and leaving his stuff there? I rang for the steward and told him to fetch the fellow. The steward went and was away a long time; I had finished washing when he came back. 'They can't find the cook, sir,' he said. 'They've looked for him everywhere, but he's disappeared.' I sent for the bo'sun then, and when the bo'sun came I told him to take three men and search for Cook. Well, I finished dressing, and just as the bell rang for breakfast the bo'sun came back to report that they'd found the cook—dead. 'Take me to him,' I said, and we went to the fo'c'sle peak—that's

where we kept the ship's stores. And there, behind a barrel of oil, Cook was lying face downwards. He only had trousers on—no slippers, no shirt—and a knife was sticking in his back.

"We did a bit of private investigation, and later on, at Aden, the police came aboard and stayed a whole day, examining and cross-examining everybody. But it was no use. The Chinks knew, of course, who had got him and how, but they wouldn't tell. When we asked them who Cook was they said they had no idea, because he came from another province; when we showed them the knife they said they'd never seen it before; and none of them would confess to having put that shirt into my room. . . . Nice people, the Chinese. Personally, I like them much better than the Japanese; but they're secretive b—rs, and if they decide to hush up something, no Sherlock Holmes will ever get to the bottom of it."

The saloon. I have just finished giving a Spanish lesson to the third mate, and am free for another ten minutes, when I shall take the wheel. The first mate comes in, unlocks the medicine-chest, takes out some pills and hands them to the apprentice in the doorway.

"There. Take two now and two before you turn in."

"Thank you, sir."

The apprentice disappears. The mate turns to me. He is frowning and the look in his eyes is blank: evidently he does not see me for the shadow of the many nautical preoccupations that beset his mind.

"How did you get on with the shifting to-day?" I ask.

Only now does he come to.

"Oh that bloody shifting!" he grumbles with a despondent gesture. "I don't know when we'll finish it."

"What's wrong?"

"The winch. Gets stuck every ten minutes. I told the Chief this afternoon he must send someone to have a look at it, because the beastly thing is holding us up, but all he said was: 'My men are all busy to-day.' The b—r! He'll never do anything for us. 'You haven't oiled it perhaps,' he said. It was a silly thing to say, considering I've used up a gallon of oil. So in the end he sent that fellow Parsons. But what is the good of sending Parsons, who hasn't been on a ship since 1917, and knows less about winches than I do? Well, we got it going in the end, but I bet you anything it'll get stuck again to-morrow." He suddenly breaks out into wild gesticulations. "I tell you, man, we have no time to waste!" he shouts in a high falsetto. "We'll be in Houston in sixteen days, and I want eleven clear days for the shifting, and there's a hell of a lot of painting to be done, and the decks haven't been washed yet. Damn these engineers! Always making us do their work. Look at what I've got, just look!" He shows a huge blister on his palm. "I'm not an engineer, I'm not supposed to mend winches. But what can I do if he sends that fool Parsons? Oh, to hell with it all! . . ."

He turns on his heel and walks out with long angry strides: a moment later I hear his shoes clattering up the gangway. I take a newspaper from the sofa, where it has been lying for twelve days. It is badly crumpled, for every day the mates pick it up and glance through it. They must know it by heart already, yet they do not throw it away: it has a special significance, being the last tangible link with Home.

As I go through the headings, the question which I

have been asking myself for several years comes up in my mind once more. Why on earth do people read newspapers? Five-Power Conference: Greta Garbo goes to Germany: Austria says No to Roumania: Lord Bendford's Divorce—who cares for all that, and why? It is not even News, for we have had the same things last month and last year and the year before, with only slight variations. It was a Six-Power Conference then; Greta Garbo was contemplating a trip to France; it was Roumania who said No to Austria; Lord Bendford married an heiress. . . . Here, on board this old tramp, amongst hard-working clear-minded men and the earnest reality of the sea, this Press stuff seems particularly inane and unreal. It has no interest for me, who never read papers, and it cannot have any for the millions who do, simply because it does not concern them personally in any way whatsoever. What they mistake for their interest is a delusion, something which has been artificially created out of nothing—like the shares of a non-existent company—artificially cultivated and magnified until they themselves have come to believe that verbose conferences, the trips of cinema blondes, and the bed affairs of unknown peers form part of their, the readers', own lives. And with time that belief is established in them so firmly that if by chance they are left without newspapers they feel hurt, lost and unhappy. Why?

There is only one answer to that: because the paper has become an automatic habit with them. If from to-day onwards you play marbles every morning and every evening, and discuss marbles at lunch- and tea-time, the game will, simply by dint of constant repetition, assume the same fictitious importance to you as the Press. You will then argue—as people argue now in defence of the papers—that marbles widen our horizon, that they

help us to keep in touch with Progress, that they develop this and that Social Virtue. . . . Once habit, however inane, has got hold of man, intellect will always find plenty of arguments to justify it.

I put the paper down and go up to the bridge to strike the bell and take over the wheel.

The wheel-house—a dark little room with a dim light oozing out of the inside of the compass. There is a clock on the bulkhead at the back; in front there are some lockers with flags and a Morse lamp, and the Course Board, on which is written in chalk:

<i>True Course</i>	<i>S 62 W</i>
<i>Standard</i>	<i>S 68 W</i>
<i>Steer</i>	<i>S 60 W</i>

With all that the helmsman has nothing to do, his universe being confined to two articles: the wheel and the compass. The wheel is just a wheel, smooth and greasy with much handling; the compass is a mobile circular piece of cardboard with figures and black triangles on it and a thick vertical line on the inside rim of the casing. That is the lubber-line representing the ship herself, and the task of the helmsman is to keep that line—the ship—against the figure of the course, sixty in my case. Slowly, very slowly the line detaches itself from the figure 60 and crawls a couple of degrees to one side—then slows down—remains stationary for a few seconds—quivers and crawls back, first to sixty, then a little beyond. That is the effect of the swell, which makes one side of the ship rise while the other subsides; since these two movements

cancel each other in the long run, the helmsman disregards them. But within this pendulum-like motion there is another which he must detect and counteract. Sixty is the course, and the lubber-line—the ship—has been swinging between 58 and 62. She still keeps within these limits, but dwells just a little longer on 62, as though reluctant to leave that figure. The inference is that she is trying to get off her course—a-starboard. The wheel therefore has to be put a-port, half a turn or a full turn. Now she has left 62; she swings to 60 . . . 59 . . . 58, and stays there. Release the wheel, or perhaps give it half a turn a-starboard, so as to break the momentum imparted by the previous turn. 58 . . . 60 . . . slowing down . . . 62. A pause of the right length; then back she goes. She is on her course; the helmsman relaxes and with a slight shock becomes aware of his private thoughts.

So I am really going to Mexico. Why? To see Lydia, of course. But why do I want to see her? Not only because she is Lydia; I always felt I had another reason, but I could not put my finger on it; and now I suddenly see what it is. I want her to examine me, that is the reason; I want her to examine the latest adult edition of myself, modified and I hope improved by three years of special training. Lydia is an ideal examiner for me, better than Nadya, partly because she is an outsider and therefore more capable of objective judgment, and partly because in her, as in myself, emotion and intellect are about equally developed, whereas Nadya is an emotional woman *par excellence*, apt to under-estimate intellect and put too much trust in spontaneous, unreasoning feeling. Kindness, to her mind, is all that matters, whereas I believe that kindness, unless it works in alliance with intellect and instinct, often wastes

itself and sometimes does more harm than good. . . .

61 . . . 62 . . . creeping towards 63. Half a turn a-port. If she touches 63 that will mean that my Gypsy novel. . . . There I am at it again! The old fear complex! You dunderhead! . . .

I make my mind blank for a few moments, then I let it play freely and watch the thoughts that are passing through it. Most of them are too quick for me to catch—just silhouettes of thoughts; others are slower and clearer.

I see Lydia in the hall of her house, waving her arms in alarm, while her eyes glisten with laughter; for her father is working behind the white door on the left, and I, in a burst of high spirits, have suddenly started yodelling.

I remember the surly glance one of the men gave me this morning—heaven knows why. We were standing by the rail, and I was just going to say something friendly to him, but did not, because hostility in other people always makes me tongue-tied.

I see Vincent's face in profile, his eyebrows working up and down, and I hear him say, his voice sounding unnatural with embarrassment: "All right then, let me pay your travelling expenses."

I take part in a brief but violent erotic incident with an imaginary faceless women. (Before, I tried to squash such imaginings for I considered them Bad. Now I do not think they are worse than any other thoughts; I pay no attention to them, and they only come in flashes. Typical body-thoughts, of course, projections of physical instinct on the intellectual plane.)

I shudder, visualising the dish of tapioca which was served at dinner to-day. No one at the table touched it, and the Captain winked at me and said: "We call it Blue B—ry. Don't forget to put that in your book."

I re-live the giddy moment when, climbing up a vertical ladder on the outside of a house under construction, I got stuck half-way. That occurred just before my departure. In my review of a Russian book I had pointed out a blatant Communist lie about the super-miraculous efficiency of the Soviet bricklayers. As some stupid parlour Communists disputed my contention I went to interview a foreman who, as it happened, was working on the top of the building.

For the fraction of a second I see a sheet of paper with a column of words written on it. That may refer—but I am not sure—to an experiment in Free Association which I made a few years ago. I prepared a list of some hundred words which I would read aloud one after another; the listener would give me his spontaneous immediate associations, which I wrote down and compared afterwards. The associations were much more varied than one might expect and formed several clearly-defined groups. There was the Obvious group (water—wet; pillow—soft); the Personal group (water—the brook behind our house; pillow—Mother's pink pillow); the Picture group (water—I saw a man jump from a bridge turning a somersault). I did it just for fun; I did not dare draw any conclusions from this diversity.

Now, if within a minute one does such a lot of half-conscious thinking, then surely a whole day—that is, sixteen waking hours—must contain enough material for a book. Is it possible to write such a book, write it true to life, realistically and not fantastically, as James Joyce did it? The difficulty, of course, would be construction: the book would tend to become terribly diffuse, a catalogue of disjointed impressions. Still, I may try my hand at it one day. Not just now, but in two years' time, after I have done the book about Lydia and the novel

about the Satanic Man. I have never met one in my life, but I know they exist, and since there is plenty of evil in me—which is really not evil but a special alloy of *avidya*, non-seeing—I have only to magnify my own tendencies beyond their actual limits. In my thoughts, for instance, I am quite capable of hitting or even murdering people who have annoyed me; so all I have to do is to intensify my wish until it produces action. . . .

Damn, I've let her swing. Wheel a-port, two turns. 64 . . . creeping . . . 65. Stop, please stop, I shall never again! . . . 66 . . . 67 . . . Damn, *chort*, *dyavol*! She mustn't touch 68; if she does everything will go wrong, my gypsy novel. . . . Stop, stop. . . . At last she's stopped; she did not touch 68, so everything will be all right. (Idiot! Baby!) Now go back! 66 . . . 65 . . . 64 . . . wheel a-starboard. Thank God, the sky is cloudy, no stars, so the mate could not possibly have noticed my lapse. Well, it was not so bad after all, only five degrees and only once; and yesterday, when watching the apprentice's wake, I saw him let her swing at least ten degrees, and that twice. . . .

The long fanatical face of Lawrence of Arabia emerges in my imagination, and a second passes before I see what bearing it has on the present moment and myself. It is this: in the humble position of an R.A.F. mechanic, Lawrence must have found the very same things which make me like steering: the peace of utter simplification and clarity, the contraction of life into a point in the present, with the future completely shuttered off. Cats live like that, naturally, and men try to live like that deliberately, when they have wasted too much energy in inner conflicts between body, emotion and intellect. By reverting to the cat-like state, they do indeed replenish their stock of energy, but the trouble is that they start

wasting it again as soon as life throws them out of their artificial equilibrium and produces new conflicts in them. These they cannot solve and so. . . .

61 . . . 62 . . . a pause . . . 61. She is all right. I hope Nadya is all right too. She is probably in the drawing-room now, knitting or sewing, her left eye screwed up, her forehead in wrinkles. And I am steering a nine-thousand tonner towards the Mexican Gulf. . . .

At sea you learn some curious things:

If you travel 100 miles due North, then 100 miles due East, then 100 miles due South and 100 miles due West, where will you get? To the point you started from? No, you won't.

With luck you can see two sunsets the same evening. (The second one being a mirage which can last up to a minute.)

Catch a shark and cut out the heart. The shark will slash about for an hour; the heart, if you put it on deck, will go on pulsating for even longer than that.

A swell can travel thousands of miles without any wind. A storm off Greenland may, a fortnight later, raise a swell off the becalmed African coast.

The ship is a magnetic system of her own, with North and South Poles. When building a ship they try to make the North-South axis run longitudinally. (But seamen always say: longtitudinally.)

The famous waterspouts in the tropics are not dangerous at all—there is no need to run away from or shoot at them.

British labour has its aristocracy: the trimmers. They earn a lot, from four to eight pounds a week. The job is

strictly hereditary, being handed down from father to son; no outsider is ever admitted. They are very strongly organised; neither the owners nor the captains dare argue with them; if they do, the trimmers walk out—for they are very touchy—and the ship cannot sail.

It is impossible to catch a cold from sea water. Therefore the seaman does not mind wading for hours up to his waist in ice-cold waves which wash over the deck. But when in the doldrums he sees a squall coming he will rush for his sou'wester.

The *Dewhurst* was losing speed the whole time. First she averaged 9.3 knots, then 8.9, then 8.4, this despite a favourable breeze. Beyond the Azores we had one stoppage on account of engine trouble; off Bermuda, another.

Through the skylight of the engine-room came the sounds of metallic hammering and human swearing: a hot cylinder-head was being taken off. The winch amidships rattled intermittently: they were shifting coal. The coal-dust was everywhere: it crunched under the feet and on the teeth, it covered the table-cloth and the rails on the bridge, the mirror in the saloon and the pillows. "Aren't you fed up with it all?" the first mate asked me, and eyed me with mistrust when I said No. He did not understand—and I knew I could not explain it to him—that I had positively come to like the discomfort—the sticky coal-dust, the shabbiness of the cabin, the filthy food—because it strengthened in me the feeling that I was participating in the life of the ship and the mates, and emphasised the distance which separated me from my habitual world, the world of ideas and books, family and money.

“Still, you wouldn’t like to be a sailor, would you?” he persisted.

“No, because it isn’t my line, I’m not cut out that way.” And as I did not want to talk about myself, I parried with the question: “What made you go to sea?”

“Oh, just silliness. My father was a seafaring man, and so was my grandfather, so I thought I must be one too. I wouldn’t do it again, believe me I wouldn’t! D’you know, man”—he livened up and began to gesticulate with his long arms—“that in the last six years I’ve only spent nine days at home? Yes, nine! In the papers they say that the schoolmasters are complaining about their conditions. If you ask me, they have no business to complain. They come home every night, they have their week-ends free and three months’ holiday—what’s wrong with that? Now take us. Here we are working eleven hours a day, seeing nothing but water at sea and filthy docks at port, and what do we get for it? Nine days in six years! Is that fair, I ask you? But the public doesn’t realise that. When the teachers complain the public sympathises and supports them and they get what they want; but we get nothing. Nobody cares about us; out of sight, out of mind. Oh, it’s a dog’s life; I’d leave it like a shot, but it’s damn difficult, there are so few jobs going ashore. . . . Take last year, when, after a voyage of nineteen months, we came to Falmouth. We were to go into dry-dock and were waiting for a berth, when suddenly a telegram arrive from the owners telling us to go in ballast to Rio. So I wired my wife to come to the ship. She came. From Aberdeen, mind you; the fare alone was seven pounds something, and all we got then was four days, and most of those four days I had to run like a hare from one place to another. And this time in Liverpool it was also four days. . . . You didn’t see my wife on board, did you?”

"No, I hadn't the pleasure."

"No, of course not, she was in my room the whole time."

He hesitated a little and produced a note-case. Out of it he extracted a photograph discoloured by time and much handling.

"This is my wife," he said in tones of subdued pride. "Taken the day we were married. Ten years this December."

I inspected the photograph and tried to think of a proper comment. I could not think of any, and decided that it did not matter: thank God, seamen are not conventional people.

"I was given three weeks' leave then," said the mate pensively, as he took the photograph back from me. "The ship had to go into dry-dock. So we went and lived on a farm in Northumberland, near Hexham. Ever been there?"

"Yes, I've often walked there."

"Oh, have you?" His face lit up with pleasure. "Then you may remember the road from Hexham to Alston."

"I do."

He told me exactly where the farm was relatively to both places. He talked about haymaking and heifers and sheep-dog trials; he criticised the wheat policy of the Government as vehemently as though he were a farmer himself. Next came the story of a horse that lived to be thirty-two; and another story about an Alsatian whom a farmer had trained to guard his car. Once when the farmer was in a pub, a policeman opened the door of the car to have a look at the licence, whereupon the dog caught him by the wrist and held fast, growling menacingly and increasing the pressure of his teeth whenever the man tried to pull away; and so they stood locked

together till the farmer came out of the pub. The police brought an action against him, but lost it.

The mate noticed that he was still holding the photograph in his hand, looked at it once more, and slowly, reluctantly put it back into the note-case. I felt that a nautical conversation would be inopportune after these personal reminiscences, and kept silent. . . .

The funny thing is that they all think me a talkative person. Mechanical thinking: the Russians are great talkers; he is a Russian; therefore he must be talkative. But that suits me very well, for it makes them talk more freely to me.

They are badly underpaid. Take the first mate. He is the manager of the ship with twenty-five to forty men under his command; he works more than anyone on board, some eighty hours a week; the range of knowledge expected of him is almost infinite: he must know how to deal with diseases and rowdyism, how to stow locomotives and tigers, timber and fruit; he must be an expert in paint and canvas, needles, wood and emery-paper; he must be able to tackle any of the ten thousand unpredictable technical problems which arise in or around the ship, at sea and in port. Yet all he gets is twenty-three pounds a month, just a little more than an adolescent second-lieutenant.

Theirs is a dangerous job: the risk to life is bigger than in any other profession, and so is the risk to their property: their belongings are not infrequently ruined or damaged by fires or gales, and as often as not they get no compensation. They have practically no holidays and no family life. The conditions they live in—I am speaking

of the majority of tramp steamers—are but one degree better than in a slum. . . . That in spite of it all they stick to their jobs may be only necessity; but the unswerving conscientiousness which they bring into the fulfilment of their duty comes not from necessity but from loyalty, loyalty to the owners who in half the cases squeeze out the maximum of service for a minimum of consideration; to the old hooker which frustrates all attempts to keep her in trim; and to each other. This is where they reap their reward, their only reward: in the knowledge that whatever happens they can rely on each other to the end. The word “mate” on board a ship is not merely a word.

Of course, they grumble and use strong language: they are not Yogis. But there is no real anger behind their swearing, none of that intolerant hot indignation from which Socialism and Communism have sprung. Had I known them ashore, I, who am apt to respond temperamentally to social injustice, might have suspected them of having no guts or no brains. But I have lived with them at sea, and somehow at sea their quiescence appears not as passivity, but as wisdom, a noble stoical wisdom.

I hate the notion Patriotism, for in practice it covers more humbug, stupidity, combativeness and hypocrisy than almost any other idea. But whenever on board the *Dewhurst* it crossed my mind that I was now citizen of the country which has bred these men, I felt a peculiar unselfish pride for which there is no other adjective but Patriotic.

That loyalty of theirs sometimes suffers odd aberrations. Here is a story the mate told me about a Master

under whom he had served some years before. I am giving it in full, as I heard it.

"He was the hardest drinker I've met in my life: the steward calculated that on an average he got through two and a half bottles of whisky a day. He never touched drink whilst we were in port, but when we had dropped the pilot he would say to me: 'You take her over now, mate,' go to his room and stay there till the end of the voyage, never coming out. On the bulkhead above his sofa—he always lay on the sofa—he had one of those thingummies fixed which they use in bars to measure whisky. Whenever I came in to report he would grumble: 'Hullo, mate,' and when I had finished: 'Do just as you like.' And I must say he played fair—he never blamed me afterwards for what I'd done off my own bat, not even when he disagreed with it.

"One day—we were five days from San Francisco heading for Panama—he sent for me. He was on the sofa, and worse than usual: he stared at me for a long time before he realised who I was.

" 'Why is it so quiet? Have you finished loading?' he asked all of a sudden.

"I told him where we were. He seemed to take it in, because he nodded, but a little later he said:

" 'If we leave with the night tide we'll be in Copenhagen the day after to-morrow.' Mixing it all up: we'd been in Copenhagen two months before, we had a new boiler put in there.

"Well, I didn't know what to say to that, so I kept quiet. And then suddenly he sat up.

" 'Why the hell don't you answer?' he roared, although he hadn't asked me any question.

"I saw he was quite crazy, so to soothe him I said: 'Yes, sir.' Mind you, he was six foot four and he had fists the

size of my head, so I wasn't keen on contradicting him. And then he pointed at the port-hole.

" 'Who's that over there? Who's that?' he cried in a kind of choking voice.

"I looked and said there was no one there, but he glowered at me.

" 'Yes, there is, you liar!' he said. 'And I know who it is. It's the second mate, he's watching me all the time, he wants to report me to the company. Only let me get hold of the swine and I'll teach him how to tell tales.'

"I said no one dreamt of reporting him—of course, it was all nonsense about the second mate—but the Old Man wouldn't pipe down. 'I'll wring his neck when I get up. I'll strangle him. I'll put him in irons!' all that sort of thing, you know. Then suddenly he went all limp, sank back on the sofa and began to breathe heavily. I turned to go, but he stopped me.

" 'Listen, mate,' he croaked. 'I'm in a bad way and I know it. So when we get to Copenhagen and my wife comes on board, don't let her in here, not at first. Keep her in the saloon, tell her I'm ill—anything you like, but she mustn't see me in this state.'

"He slobbered a little, probably forgetting that I was there, then he opened his eyes and stared at me.

" 'What are you doing here? Spying on me, eh?' he asked in a sort of suspicious manner, and began to get up. He looked terrible, so I backed out of the room and went to the foredeck to get some fresh air. It takes quite a lot out of you talking to a lunatic when you know that he can kill you at any moment.

"Altogether I was with him for sixteen months, and he gave us a lot of trouble. Once—that was off the Philippines—we got into a typhoon and I had to bring the ship

to: she couldn't stand the sea broadside on. Somehow the Old Man noticed that and sent for me.

" 'What's the idea?' he asked. 'Why the hell did you bring her to?'

"I said I had to because the sea was heavy, but he wouldn't listen to me.

" 'Nonsense,' he said, 'it's only a fresh breeze, put her back on her course.'

"I said I couldn't do that, it was too dangerous, and I suggested he came out and saw for himself what the sea was like. That made him quite wild.

" 'Oh, so you're going to teach me, are you?' he said, drew a revolver from under the pillow—he always kept it there—and pointed it at me. 'Will you carry out my orders or not?'

"Well, I had to say, 'Yes, sir,' and I did put her back on her course. Lord, we had a bad time! The men came up to protest, and when they heard it was Captain's orders, they volunteered to go and tie him up; but I told them not to be damn fools, because I knew it would end in murder. So instead we put the steward behind the Old Man's door, and as soon as he started snoring the steward told me and I brought her to again. It was a narrow shave: we lost both our life-boats on the port side, and the door of the chart-room was smashed in.

"In Nagasaki the Old Man got into another sort of trouble. Over a woman, this time, one of those Geisha girls. As a rule, he left women alone—he loved his wife, you see—but that Geisha girl must have got under his skin. He stayed with her day and night in an opium-den, so I had a hell of a time rushing about offices and agencies and supervising the loading and the repairs all by myself. Anyhow, we finished loading and the bills of lading had to be signed, but the Old Man was still ashore with that

Geisha girl. So I and the third mate took a rickshaw and drove to her den. A filthy place it was, so smelly that it nearly made me sick, and there was the Old Man sprawling over the table with the girl squatting at his feet: I must say she was a damned pretty piece. I told him we were ready to sail, but he only waved his hand and mumbled: 'To-morrow.' Then I showed him the bills of lading and said the agent wanted them signed right now. 'Oh, he does, does he?' said the Old Man, took the bills of lading, took my pen and signed his name in two-inch letters across the text, from the bottom corner to the top.

" 'How's that? Clear enough, eh?' he said, with a sneer.

"I said the agent might not like the signature and kick up a row about it, but he took a bottle and swung it over his head, so I didn't argue any more and took to my heels. . . . I was certain he wouldn't turn up next morning, but as a matter of fact he did, he was aboard just before the tide.

"From Nagasaki we went to Colombo. He looked grimmer than ever on that journey, and I knew he worried over that signature on the bills of lading, for the agent was sure to complain to the owners, and then they would give the Old Man the sack. But he never spoke of the bills of lading, not one word. And he drank less: the steward calculated it worked out at a bottle a day, which was very little for him. And when another typhoon caught us—that was off Formosa—he came out on the bridge and took over from me. 'I'm sorry, Mate, I've been making things difficult for you,' he grumbled, and looked away. 'Go and turn in.' And he stayed on the bridge for thirty-six hours without a drop of whisky, drinking strong tea, one cup after another.

"Now, on the upper deck, by the foremast, we were

carrying a boiler for a power station in Ceylon. The ropes with which it was fixed had got loose during the typhoon, so when the sea calmed down a little the Old Man ordered them to be tightened.

"The bo'sun took five men and they set to work. He was a tiny fellow, the bo'sun, like a monkey, very clever with his hands, but, of course, not very strong. The Old Man watched him as he puffed and panted at the rope, then he said: 'Have a rest, bo'sun,' and took the rope himself. With him they made one end fast in no time because he was as strong as the lot of them, and then they tackled the other end. That end had to be brought nearer to the foremast; so the Old Man placed himself in front of the mast and took the rope which acted as a brake. He signed to the men; they slackened bit by bit, and the boiler began to shift towards the mast, when all of a sudden the Old Man slipped and fell. Now, had he been in proper trim that wouldn't have mattered, for he would have held the rope all the same—it's a sort of instinct with us seafaring men. But the whisky must have slowed down his brain, for he let the rope slip out of his hand. And just then the ship gave a heavy lurch; the loose end of the boiler shifted with a rush—the men alone hadn't the strength to hold it—and squashed the Old Man against the mast. When we got him he was dead, with every rib broken.

"His wife? No, I've never seen her. The second mate has—she came to Copenhagen once when we were having a new boiler put in—and he said she was no good: painted all over and making glad eyes at everybody—a silly woman. I suppose that's what made the Old Man drink. Still, he must have cared for her, because when I went through his desk—I had to, to get hold of the ship's papers—I found a drawer full of her photos. Expensive photos

they were, some of them the size of our files, and every one in a special envelope with a date on it."

The story over, he lit his pipe, while I wondered how I could formulate a question I had in mind. He helped me, unwittingly.

"There was another captain in our company who drank just as much," he said. "He was even worse, because when drunk he used to fight; he nearly killed the steward once, smashed a bottle on his head. In the end the owners sacked him. And the mate as well."

"Why the mate?" I asked.

"For not reporting him, of course."

Now that we were out of personal waters, I could ask my question.

"I should say the owners were right, don't you think so?" I said. "After all, it wasn't only a question of the ship and the cargo. There were some thirty men on board, and the Captain was a danger to their lives."

"Yes, I suppose so," muttered the mate hesitantly. "All the same, one doesn't like going behind a fellow's back. Especially if the Old Man happens to be decent, as ours was, the one I told you about just now. One day in Nagasaki the men complained about their ration of milk, so he ordered six hampers of Nestlé for them. Out of his own pocket, because the rations were fixed and he couldn't exceed them. And once, that was in Bristol, he gave up two days of his leave to let me go and see my wife. Not many captains would do that, I can tell you."

Loyalty, unreasoning, senseless, even self-destructive—and noble.

The saloon again. The mate, the second mate and

Sparks are talking politics. Sparks is a harmless, fish-eyed, dull fellow with a funny conical head and a permanent silly pout. Beside the mates he seems to belong to another inferior race. He is a Socialist and a Scotchman, so to tease him they are running down Ramsay MacDonald.

"Look at what your Ramsay's done," shouts the mate, waving a spanner. "The League of Nations, that was all he knew. And where did that League of Nations get us? Nowhere! We only lost our prestige, that's all we've got out of his League of Nations. Oh, you Scotch people, you always get us into a mess."

"Ramsay MacDonald was a real statesman, the only one we've had," maintains Sparks, and the stolid, dignified manner in which he speaks reminds me of the people ashore: the clerks, the grocers, the bourgeois. "You say our prestige is gone. But where is it gone? In Germany and Italy, where they couldn't bear us anyhow because we are a democracy. So why blame Ramsay . . . ?"

"Democracy!" echoes the second mate derisively. "What democracy are you talking about, Sparks? Show it me. I was in the service when your Ramsay was Premier, and so were you. Well, what have we seamen got out of his democracy? Tell me, what?"

"He couldn't do much because he hadn't a majority."

"Ah, a majority!" chimes in the mate. "Now listen, Sparks." He pokes his bony finger in the direction of Sparks's narrow chest. "You say he was an honest man, don't you? Well then, if he hadn't a majority, why the hell did he accept the job? Answer me that."

Sparks opens his pouting lips to answer, but the mate does not let him.

"I'll tell you why," he shouts. "Because he was ambitious, your Ramsay was, as ambitious as the rest of them. Wanted to hobnob with Lords and Viscountesses.

You remember, Harvey"—he turns for support to the second mate—"those pictures in the magazines: Ramsay at Lord So-and-So's, Ramsay playing golf with Lady So-and-so. . . ."

"Now you're being personal," protests Sparks. "He was trying to introduce Socialism, and in a non-Socialist country. . . ."

"Socialism! Get away with your Socialism!" chants the mate, tossing his head in annoyance. "Look at what Socialism has done in Russia!"

"That's Communism, not Socialism!"

And now they are all talking at once:

"Communism is also Socialism."

"No, it isn't!"

"Yes, it is!"

"Why don't you go to Russia, Sparks?"

"I tell you, Ramsay . . ."

Sparks suddenly flares up. The anger on his weak face, puffed up by too much sleep and too little exercise, produces a comical effect.

"So you don't want Socialism, don't you?" he shouts. "Very well then, you've got capitalism and private initiative and Messrs. Tweedy who exploit and underpay you, and treat you like dirt. But in that case, what right have you to grumble?"

His outburst produces an immediate calm; his opponents are taken aback by his vehemence. The mate blinks with a puzzled air and irresolutely twirls the spanner in his fingers. The second mate concentrates on the end of his cigarette. Then he catches my eye—I have taken no part in the discussion—and winks at Sparks.

"Good old Sparks," he drawls with good-natured humour. "What would we all do without you?"

And now it's the mate's turn to burst out.

"Oh, to hell with the lot of you!" he shouts, and starts furiously buttoning up his jacket. "You only make me waste my time with your politics. I haven't even washed my hands yet, look at them." He stretches out his hands, they are indeed quite black. "You . . . Socialist!"

He makes as if to wipe his palms on Sparks's head and walks out with his long steps. The combative impetus is utterly spent. Sparks glances at the clock, mumbles something to himself and gets up: it is time for him to listen in. The second mate and I are left alone. He lights another cigarette and settles more comfortably in the chair.

"Politics!" he drawls, with mild sarcasm. "You mustn't think, Mr. Gubsky, that we really mean what we say. We only talk like that to while the time away."

I know that. The seaman has practically no access to that powerful generator of mass-suggestion, the newspaper; also the rough reality of the sea is a strong antidote to humbug, vagueness and loose thinking. Therefore he is far less suggestible than the man ashore, less a fraction of the herd and more an individual; and because he is that, he realises more or less consciously the utter, hopeless irreality of all politics. He knows—or guesses—that politics is a mess of loose emotions, ambitions and interests, so intermixed and intertwined that no human mind and no god can hope to disentangle, let alone control them. He knows, or guesses, that politics should not be taken seriously, since the mental age of a nation—any nation—is far below that of its average citizen. Taken singly, A, B, C and D may have a mental age of, say, 40. Bring them together and let them act together—and the mental age of the group they have formed will sink to twenty (as exemplified by any golf club or bazaar committee). Increase that group a millionfold till you make it the size of a nation, and

you will have the picture of a meeting of schoolboys: a seething chaos of unstable emotions, alliances dissolved in a second, antagonisms springing up for no reason. True, nations differ, and if Russia, for instance, is a Lower Fourth, England may be an Upper Sixth; but whatever the difference, they are all incapable of ordering their existence, they all live like children, erratically, obeying their casual whims, disregarding the admonitions of their mature members. It probably amounts to this, that a series of unusually intelligent and conscientious statesmen working for a century may raise the age of a nation—measuring it in terms of individual growth—by something like a month. . . . As for the League of Nations, that organism is obviously still in its babyhood.

This is as it should be. The nation may be immature as compared with a grown-up individual, but then the comparison is inadmissible, for their time values are as incommensurate as those of a young elephant and a middle-aged butterfly. Even assuming that the butterfly has the same kind of mind as the elephant, it cannot, on account of the difference in time value, understand his motives and needs, just as we cannot understand a cinema drama slowed down to one hundredth of the speed we are used to. And if I, an intelligent man, find it difficult to decide whether my daughter has done well in choosing Phyl as her bosom friend or taking the job at the Bliss Insurance Company, what hopes have I of determining how the forty-five million people of the United Kingdom are affected by the fact that we have a Conservative Government, that we are off the gold standard, that the income tax begins at £180 and not £100 or £300. Or, in matters international, was it good or bad that we supported the League of Nations against

a square-chinned dictator? that we refused (or agreed) to guarantee somebody's territorial integrity? that our answer to Herr Hitler's last note was cool and not cold or hot? Neither I nor anyone else can tell; these questions will for ever remain as unanswerable as the question whether it is good or bad for France to have had Napoleon is unanswerable to us. Therefore it is as futile for an individual to talk of good or bad policy as it would be for a butterfly to judge what suits Jumbo the Giant best. Therefore there can be no such thing as good or bad politicians: all one can say about the man is whether he is calm or fussy, polite or rude, charming or unpleasant, for these are personal qualities which we individuals are trained to measure. . . . The Chinese understand that, also intelligent women.

How is it then that everybody—every shopkeeper, cavalry officer, viscount, watchmaker, and osteopath—knows perfectly well what is Good and Bad in politics? What mysterious process enables 99% of the population in this or any other country to understand the incomprehensible and argue with white-hot conviction that to support the League of Nations was a Bad Thing; that our note to Hitler was Just Right; that it is a Fatal Mistake to begin the income tax at £180; that the country will Go to the Dogs unless it guarantees Ruritania's independence?

The source of their miraculous enlightenment is the Press. Two men, both normally unintelligent and ignorant, both with tons of money, push and ambition, found two newspapers. They each engage, say, a hundred men whose main qualification is the mastery of journalese, that is the ability to produce quickly and glibly a thousand words about something of which neither they nor anyone else can know anything. The

first owner says to his staff: Look Right; the second: Look Left. The two hundred men look in directions indicated, sit down and write. They write about deflation in Germany, Catholicism in Yugoslavia, the tax on toilet paper—anything. They need not fear that their bluff will be called, for who can disprove it if they maintain that the tax on toilet paper will ruin (or revive) our industry; that Rumania has begun to love (or hate) Hungary; that under the Nazi régime the German workman eats 250% more (or less) than he did in the Kaiser's time? What they say does not matter so long as it matches with the owner's political tastes and is said in such a way as to arouse the interest of the reader and induce him to buy the next copy of that particular paper. Now the interest of the reader is best aroused via his emotional system; hence sensationalism, stridency of voice, reckless dramatisation. The reader wants thrills—let him have them; and if there are no thrills they must be created. Hitler's Threat to Paraguay! Siberia to be Electrified! Dangerous Tension in the Eight Power Conference! . . . A week passes; Germany seems to have forgotten where Paraguay is; Siberia persists in sempiternal darkness; the Geneva nursery goes on babbling as futilely as heretofore. So new Stunning Revelations appear: Hitler's South American Sympathies! Dearth of Electricity in Russia! Wave of Optimism in Geneva! "Mr. Eden left the meeting puffing rather nervously at his cigar. However, on his way to the lavatory he seemed to cheer up, and I saw him turn to Señor Huelga and show his ink-stained fingers: 'That wretched fountain-pen of mine is leaking again,' said Mr. Eden, with his usual bright smile."

The greatest boon of all politicians, whether of the platform, the Press or the drawing-room, is, of course,

Russia. The Russian Revolution is obviously a Big Thing, the biggest of the century. It is important inasmuch as it affects every single issue in this country. Being also a bloody red drama, it tickles the emotional centre as strongly as the very best thrillers do: it is an unending thriller. Also Russia happens to be far away; she speaks a language which nobody knows, and her statistics are notoriously unreliable. Therefore the leader writer, the special correspondent, the illustrious traveller are as free to write what they like about Russia as God was when He set about to create the world. They may assert that the Russians hate Communism—or adore it; that the peasants are rich—or destitute; that there has been no terror for years—or that the terror has been growing the whole time—anything they may say will be swallowed by millions of readers who thereafter will know the Truth About Russia.

The only class of people to whom that Truth is not revealed are the seamen (to a lesser extent the doctors). If you press them they will say that Communism may be all right, but that the Russian version of it is a bit too messy and bloody, which is indeed the only objective judgment one can pronounce on the Russian Revolution. As you won't get more out of them in the way of generalisations, you are advised to ask them whether they have been to Russia and what they saw there. They will tell you and leave it to you to draw the conclusions—if you must do so.

The Captain is speaking. His political outlook is very simple: Any régime is equally good—provided it works.

“ . . . That was in Poti on the Black Sea coast. We stayed there a fortnight because the Russians were terribly slow in discharging: they had too many bosses who got in each other's way the whole time. One day the

mate and I were ashore strolling about the town when we saw a funny procession: some forty girls—street girls, you know—and ten soldiers with bayonets escorting them. We wondered what that meant, so we followed them. They were taken to the quay and put on board a little coastal boat, very old and filthy-looking. Our purveyor—he was a Greek—happened to be on the quay, and he told us that because of some revolutionary holiday or other Poti had decided to get rid of the prostitutes, so the girls were being deported to Sebastopol. Well, the little boat pushed off. She passed quite close to us—in fact, she nearly bumped into us—and the girls were on deck waving their handkerchiefs to our men and shouting something. But by sunset she was back, with a cloud of steam around her—she must have had some engine trouble—and the ten soldiers with bayonets took the girls back to town. But that was not the end. The next day another bigger boat came along, picked up the girls and off they went again. We thought they had gone for good this time, but they hadn't: a week later the boat was back to Poti with the girls still on board and waving their handkerchiefs; the same soldiers came up and marched them off. The Greek explained to us that Sebastopol wouldn't have them, so they would be put in prison now. . . .

“In the papers one often reads that there is no prostitution in Russia, but all I know is that I've been to Poti and other places over there for three years running and we had plenty of trouble on account of the girls. My orders were that the men when going ashore should be given not money but Torgsin counters—Torgsin being the place where you could always get what you wanted when the other shops had nothing to sell. Well, with these counters the men would go to the Torgsin and buy cheese

and bread and sugar, and as they came out there would be a queue of girls waiting for them by the exit, so each man would pick a girl and go with her, and at night they would all come aboard empty-handed, of course. That was a nuisance because on the homeward journey I always had four or five of them laid up with venereal diseases. . . . Oh yes, it's a lot: as a rule, after a foreign port I only have one case, or two if I'm unlucky. . . . So the last time we were in Poti I didn't give the men any money, and as the Torgsin had been closed down, I thought they were safe. But no such luck! They went ashore and came back at night some without their coats, others without their singlets, and one of them got sunstroke because he had left his hat with the girl. Fancy, giving herself for a sailor's old hat!

"That time an Italian was berthed next to us, and the Captain was a man I knew: we used to meet every year in all sorts of unexpected places. He was a funny old chap called Benito—like Mussolini. I asked him to come over one evening and have a drink with me, but he said he couldn't, he spent all his evenings at the Workman's Club, which was a fine big house with a red flag and a big portrait of Stalin over the entrance. 'Why the hell do you go there?' I asked, and he said he had to supervise his men. 'You see,' he said, 'I've been here eleven times, and I know exactly which girls are healthy and which aren't. But my men are fools, they never listen to me, so on the last trip, for instance, I had eight of them on the sick list, and when we got into a gale all the three mates had to work on deck day and night.' Well, we sailed before Benito, but a year later I ran into him at New York, and then he told me that on his homeward journey he had eleven men sick. Broken all records! He also said he had told the owners that he wouldn't go to

Russia any more, not if they doubled his salary. . . .”

The second mate is speaking. His definition of politics, Right and Left alike, is Bilge, or, if he wants to be technical, Bilge Water.

“We were at Nickliff” (meaning Nikolayeff, near Odessa) “and there was another British steamer farther down the quay, the *Aden*, ready to sail for Vladivostok. I was in charge of the ship’s library, and as we’d been away from home for a year and had read everything we had on board, I agreed with the second mate of the *Aden* to swop ten books. So I took these ten books and went to the *Aden*, but at her gangway two Russian chaps with bayonets stopped me. ‘*Nelzya*,’ they said, pointing at the books and then on the ground, meaning that if I wanted to go aboard I must leave the books behind. I argued with them, but they kept on saying ‘*Nelzya*.’ Then another fellow with a huge revolver came along, and they jabbered and nodded at the *Aden*. Finally he beckoned me to follow him, and we all went to their G.P.U. place. There we waited for an hour and then an officer came in. He was drunk, although it was day-time and terribly hot, but he knew a little English, so I explained to him about the swopping. No, he said, that wasn’t allowed. ‘Not allowed?’ I said. ‘And you call that a Socialist country? Now listen,’ I said, ‘when we get home the first thing I’ll do will be to write a letter to the *Daily Mail* about your Socialism and how your G.P.U. men don’t let British working men read their own books.’ He looked scared, I don’t know why. ‘Just a mo,’ he said, and rang someone up on the phone. It must have been a long-distance call, because at first he couldn’t get an answer, and then he had to yell at the top of his voice. Anyhow, when he’d finished he turned to me and smiled nicely. It was all right, he said, I could swop the books and he would help

me. So all of us went back to the *Aden*: he and the fellow with the revolver and the two soldiers with bayonets and myself. All the same, he wouldn't let me go up the gangway, so the *Aden's* mate with his ten books had to come down to the quay, then the G.P.U. man shook every one of them and turned the pages, then he went through my books, and only then were we allowed to swop them. I was late for our evening meal, and as I'd left soon after dinner, the whole show must have taken five hours."

A Liverpool pilot is speaking, an under-sized Cockney with tight bitter lips. A fierce Socialist: of what he has to say about the owners, the capitalists and the Government very little could be printed.

"These Russian ships make me sick. Everything is filthy, on deck and in the cabin. As for the officers' W.C., you have to take a run to get in. Some of their ships have a stewardess, and then everything is filthier still. And their discipline is rotten. The Captain says something to the mate, and instead of doing what he's been told, the mate talks back and they start arguing. The same with men: if something has to be done they call a meeting and talk for hours. One day I remember I was taking a Russian up the fairway. It was dinner-time, so the mate on watch went down to eat—nice, that, eh?—leaving me and the helmsman on the bridge. I was looking at the buoys when I suddenly noticed that we were swinging off our course. I turned, and there was the helmsman rolling a cigarette, if you please, with a bit of newspaper, as Russians do. And we were on a curve just then! I couldn't bear that; I told the man to go to hell and took the wheel myself. Did he mind? Not he. He just slouched off to the cab and smoked his cigarette there. When the gentlemen below had finished their dinner the mate came up and asked me what I was doing at the wheel. I told

him about the cigarette and said he must send up another man. He was sort of confused or scared, I couldn't make out which; he looked at the man and said to me: 'Oh, but why? He is very good sailor, very good.' I didn't want to argue with him, so I went down and complained to the Captain, who also looked uneasy and said: 'Why, he's one of our best men.' 'If that's so,' I said, 'I'd like to see what your worst men are like.' He swallowed it all right. . . . I suppose that fellow with the cigarette must have been a G.P.U. man, that's why they were afraid of changing him.

"The worst about these Russian boats is a kind of suspicion hanging in the air. If you ask the Captain or one of the mates some question, an ordinary question, not political, but something about the Russian lighthouses or buoys, they'll never answer properly, they just mumble and look away. And if you go on talking to them, one of the crew always comes up—I suppose one who knows English—and stands by listening the whole time, and then the Captain or the mate shuts up altogether. At meals—the officers and the men eat together, you know—no one says a word, they all sit sullen like and stare at their plates. I tell you, it gets on one's nerves. Sometimes I have to spend a day or two on board an incoming ship when she's waiting for a berth. As a rule, after I've been away from home for so long, I take my wife to the cinema or somewhere, but after a Russian ship I always stay at home; I don't want any cinemas or theatres, I just want to sit quietly and look at the fire until I've got that depression out of me."

In our civilised age the proximity of land is heralded

not by birds or banks of clouds, but by a livening up of the wireless as new stations come within its range. First the Cuban stations: languid, enervating melodies of sweet sultry decay; inspired political speeches resounding with words like *Libertad*, *Gloria*, *Progreso*, *Democracia*; and commercial intermezzi. Preceded by a blast of the clarinet, a stentorian voice announces in the solemn tones in which Emperors were proclaimed of old:

"Triana Sirup para los dolores de intestinos."

Another blast, and rising a note higher the voice thunders forth:

"Nothing like Blogg's Powder for B.O."

Then two excellent sopranos sing to a tune heavily charged with sex energy:

"Everybody needs Grape Salt.

Its taste is superior,

It is good for children and adults,

*I always carry it with me." (Siempre
lo llevo conmi-i-i-go.)*

After Cuba the States begin to pour in on their four hundred and ninety wave-lengths. Nasal twang, hurrying, insistent, hypnotising, relentless, bombards the eardrums with the same old unreal twaddle about disarmament, conferences, tariffs, democracy. Before one announcer has finished uttering the last syllable another steps in and talks about some epoch-making bust bodices. A crooner intones: "It's a strain—On the brain—To love yuuuuu," varied by: "I've hitched my wagon to a Movie Star." From some corner of the ether come the faint sounds of a symphony, but you cannot get it, or if you do, it is swamped the next moment by the hurrying voices

and strident saxophones. Sparks curses: "I can't get the Morse signals because of this bloody noise."

Civilisation, I reflect, defeats its own ends. Knowledge: there is so much of it that we are lost in its labyrinth and know less about the essentials of life than a Congo nigger does. Thrills: we have so many that nothing thrills us any longer. Motoring: the roads being crowded with cars, driving has become a nuisance. Books: stunned by the avalanche of printed stuff we get less and less capable of discriminating between good books and bad, we use them all as a dope. Speeds: they are getting so high as to kill all impressions of shape. A well-known pilot, I was told, has recently sold his aeroplane and is happy driving about with his wife in a combination motor-bike.

To shake off civilised sounds and thoughts I go on deck. The evening is wonderful, calm and very warm. A half-transparent haze hangs in the air, and through that haze the yellow orb of the rising moon peers like a huge dead eye at the steely grey expanse of the ocean—a scenery which makes one think of the last day of Creation. I sit down on a coil of ropes by the fo'c'sle and forget where I am, when suddenly I become aware of a beautiful aroma. It is like scent, but subtler than any scent. I remember the chapter in *Moby Dick* about the ambergris; but then we have not got a whale aboard. Suddenly I realise: it is the smell of land. Now I recognise its nature: it is like drying hay, only sweeter and richer, a chord rather than a note, as though it were coming not from common grass, but from acres of cut flowers. I sit inhaling the fragrance, afraid of moving, a shiver of primitive delight running down my spine. Several minutes pass, and then, as suddenly as it has appeared, the smell is gone. . . . We were at the time

seventy nautical miles from the nearest land, the Bahamas.

The saloon. The steward sprawls his arms over the table and smokes, shifting his cigarette from one side of his mouth to the other and back again.

"So you'll soon be in Mexico, Mister?"

"I hope so."

"Want to be their President?"

"No."

"Why not? The muckers make a lot of money."

"If they aren't killed in the process."

"Killed?" His face glows with saturnine glee. "You've said it, mister. They're popped off like partridges."

He rises, squares his shoulders, assumes a truculent expression.

"I am the President of Mexico," he croaks. "Your life or your money, citizens! The President wants your bloody money for the glory of our great country." A gesture indicating that the money goes into His Excellency's pocket. "And now a chap comes along, a fat bastard, all eepohlettes and revolvers and hand-grenades. 'Ha, Seenyor, so you are the blooming President, are you? Well, take this!' He shoves the revolver into your ribs and blows your innards out."

The impersonation over, the steward subsides on to the sofa. I tell myself that I ought to be polite to the old man—if only on account of his age—and show some response; but firstly, I do not believe that old age deserves more respect than any other, and secondly, I do not like Old Jack. So I look at my toes and ignore him. He turns to the second mate.

"Yes, Mr. Harvey, that's what they do in Mexico. Blow your bloody guts out. In South America they do that too. I've been there, I know. We were in Valparaiso once, loading, when one of their bloody Generals came along. He was after the Captain's whisky. . . ."

The mate pretends to listen, his eyes express boredom. Since I refuse to be bored, I turn deaf and think about the Great Body, which is Nietzsche's term for the whole of man, the triune combination of physical body, emotion and intellect. Of the three, intellect is the youngest: it is hardly twenty thousand years since mankind has begun to think in a more or less human way. Emotion is much older: its age must be measured in hundreds of thousands of years, since the higher animals experience much the same feelings of love, hatred and irritation as we do. The physical body with its instincts of self-preservation and sex, is millions of years old. That is why we can control our intellect fairly easily—if we know how; our emotions less easily, and our physical instincts hardly at all—unless we are Yogis. But Can does not mean Do: as a matter of fact, people do not control themselves, do not try to organise their Great Body, do not believe that this is possible: they let instinct, emotion and intellect live each for itself, fighting each other and disregarding the whole, the Great Body. Hence constant waste of energy through inner friction. . . .

I see the mate turn towards me, so I interrupt my thoughts.

"Well, Mr. Gubsky," he says, "I suppose you'll be glad to leave us."

"Oh yes, he will," the steward interjects. "He'll jump ashore like a flea. No offence meant, mister." He grins amiably, but I know he dislikes me as intensely as I dis-

like him. "She's a filthy ship, the *Dewhurst* is, and ours is a filthy life."

The mate is still waiting for my answer, but I do not know what to say. As in most cases when man's mind is involved, the answer is both Yes and No. Yes, because it is time I saw Lydia; and No, because in these four weeks I have grown to love the men I have lived with, my watches at the wheel, the sense of quiet, intelligent order which informs the régime of the ship, and oddly enough, the ship herself, the filthy, rusty old tub. After loading at Houston they will go on to New Zealand, a sixty-day passage—sixty days of pure salt air, wide horizons, rough, genuine comradeship, and mental serenity; no wonder one half of me longs to go with them. But I cannot explain my contradictory feelings to the mate—the sea has made me more inarticulate than ever—so I only say:

"You may not believe it, but I'll often long to be back with you."

He eyes me with mistrust.

"Oh, you'll forget us all right when you get ashore," he drawls, and in his voice I detect the first note of another longing, the reverse of mine. It will grow in him with the years, until it fills the whole of his being with an unceasing nostalgia, for the urge behind it—the family instinct—is much stronger and older than any individual ambitions or tastes.

At Houston, as the only passenger on board, I was privileged to have an entire Immigration Entry Form to myself—a sheet some forty inches long vertically divided into as many columns: What is your nationality? Where

were you born? Are you a lunatic? Do you believe in anarchism? In bigamy? . . . After the form was completed the Immigration Officer leant back in his rocking-chair and talked at me for a quarter of an hour, scratching himself in various private places. So far as I could make out—for his twang was very nasal and his set of teeth incomplete—he opined that both the Captain and I ought to be fined a hundred dollars each for having written the answers by hand instead of typing them out. Having proved his point, he spat (missing the cuspidor by a yard or so), shook my hand with a cordial: "Pleasant-meetyou," and let me go.

In the few hours I spent in Houston I made some valuable observations.

There is a lot of space in Texas. Whichever way you turn you see space. In Houston most of it is occupied by houses and cars. The houses are of all kinds, the cars all look brand-new and are parked at the unfamiliar angle of forty-five degrees to the pavement.

The waitresses in Texan restaurants are voluble, natural, soft-eyed and altogether charming. I became fast friends with the one who attended to me, and—a thing I should never know how to do at home—asked her to come with me to the cinema or somewhere. She said they would not let her. Which shows that capitalism is as brutal in the States as in Europe.

Texan cooking is good, very good. To appreciate it fully you should spend a month on a British tramp steamer.

On reaching a particularly impressive skyscraper I stopped and started counting the storeys from the bottom upward. I had counted twenty-two when one of the vertebræ in my neck creaked ominously and I had to desist.

After an hour's roaming about the town, I went back to the restaurant and had another dinner, which was served by the same waitress. She said nothing but the most ordinary things, but her eyes were so soft and her movement so womanly that I asked her to have some ice-cream with me. She said that was against the rules.

At the Tourist Office they told me that the proper way of getting to Mexico City was by rail. So I decided to travel by bus.

Texas is a colossal state consisting of oilfields, towns (with houses and cars) and limitless spaces of nothing at all, overgrown with uninteresting acacia-like trees. Sometimes the space is divided into allotments, each of which has a pole with a board on it and a name on the board: Jimmie's Hip, Dry Martini, Naughty Papa, and the like.

The dawn at San Antonio was misty and very cold. I ate a lot and bought a Mexican novel with a disgusting picture of a naked female on the dust-jacket. The novel was extraordinarily bad, worse than any of our best sellers, worse than the worst ever written by Begonia Sweetfill. On ascertaining that nobody was looking my way I shoved the book under the kitbag of a sleeping cowboy who was quite unlike the attractive Wild West heroes I had seen in the cinema: he was fat, chinless and ugly, with a flowering alcoholic nose. Unfortunately my bus departed before he woke up: it would have been edifying to watch his reaction to the dust-jacket.

In Laredo, the frontier town, it was cold and drizzling. The palms looked as ordinary and bedraggled as the

plane-trees in Russell Square on a December afternoon. No one knew anything about the buses to Mexico City. Oh yes, I would get there eventually. When? In three days or so, they guessed. Anyhow, I could only get a ticket as far as Monterey.

PART TWO

"I have a weakness for cacti," said Robinson to himself, glancing at a forest of slender palms.

"They always remind me of the tropics."

—From *The Modern Robinson* (I. F. Tavrov).

THE Immigration Office at Nuevo Laredo, on the Mexican side. I have paid a deposit of thirty pounds as a guarantee that I shall not outstay the term of my visa, and a half-caste official with a squashed nose and eyes set fully an inch below the normal position sits down to type out the receipt. He inserts a sheet with four carbon copies into the machine, shuts his eyes and reflects upon the Plan of the composition: being a writer myself, I recognise creative effort. Presently the Plan is formed in his mind; he starts typing, types out two lines—and stops. Evidently he is dissatisfied with the Plan, for he pulls out the sheets, destroys them, puts in new ones and resumes typing. Close behind him, in the narrow space between his back and the window, four clerks are talking all at the same time and very fast. Judging by the dark glow in their inscrutable Indian eyes one might think they are plotting a revolution, but as a matter of fact they are discussing whether a certain Ramirez will or will not make it up with his cousin. “What do you think, *hombre*?” one of them asks the official, patting him on the shoulder. “He will not,” declares the *hombre* with great firmness—and makes a mistake in typing. He tried to rub it out—and makes a mess. He pulls out the sheets and throws them away. As there are no clean sheets in his drawer he gets up and goes to a man in the corner, who after some palaver supplies him with the necessary. In the meantime, however, he has forgotten the Plan, so he shuts his eyes once more to reconstruct it. The four clerks go on chatting. “Oh, no, Ramirez wasn’t there; I know because

I saw him at the Zapotas'," maintains one of them, and for some reason they all laugh. The *hombre* chuckles too, and pulls the carriage of the machine with such vigour that the sheets in it are all crumpled up. He leans back in his chair and with deadly earnestness contemplates his ruined work. The clerks stop talking, and now it is ten eyes that stare at the typewriter. "You'll have to do it again," says one of the clerks helpfully.

I timed the man. It took him fourteen minutes to write a receipt of five lines. And later on it took me a good ten hours of rushing about various government offices, plus three months of waiting to get back my deposit.

A low decrepit bus is standing behind the office; I climb in. I am the last passenger; all seats are occupied, the gangway is crammed with cases, bags and baskets. As soon as I am in we drive off with a furious jerk which causes several articles to drop from the racks. We turn sharply, missing the corner of the building by a hair's breadth, and stop. Five minutes pass, ten minutes—nothing happens. The passengers, mostly Indios, sit motionless as statues, staring straight ahead; no one says a word. Intuitively I know it is no use asking the reason for the delay: this is Mexico. Fifteen minutes; twenty minutes. . . . At last two officers—brand-new khaki, glossy leather straps, outsize revolvers and flabby pear-shaped faces—come sauntering up and demand to see our passports (which have just been inspected at the office). It is a lengthy procedure. When it is over a third officer appears, who wants to know about somebody's luggage. Two Indio women, a boy and the driver

explain that the luggage in question is not going, was not meant to go, was never loaded. Why not? asks the officer, and they explain why. He is not satisfied with their explanations; pouting, he leaves the bus and converses with his colleagues, two scores of dark liquid eyes fixing their group with that arrested, paralysed look which made D. H. Lawrence write so much utter rubbish about the mysterious Indian soul and the undying spirit of Montezuma. In the end the three warriors fling their cigarettes to the ground and nod to the driver: *Està bien*.

And now comes the moment of my triumph. For when paying in my traveller's cheque I omitted to affix my second signature, without which it is invalid, and as I did not leave my address in Mexico City they will never be able to trace me there. It is a just revenge for the precious hours they made me waste, and with malicious joy I visualise a swarm of liquid-eyed officials darting in helpless consternation about their departments. I glare hypnotically at the driver's neck: Quick, quick, quick! He switches on the engine, presses the self-starter, and the balloon of my triumph sinks like a stone to the ground. For there is an outcry and a commotion, and a man is running hard from the office waving a paper—my cheque. "Excuse me, Señor, but we have forgotten. . . ."

Grey sky, drizzle, cold; who said it was hot in the tropics? A straight asphalt road and the same monotonous featureless bush as in Texas, miles and miles of it. Occasionally a prickly pear or a palm. The palms look shabby, as though made of sodden papier-mâché; the prickly pears are simply out of place. "I am in Mexico," I say to myself, but the thought fails to thrill me. I still

have eight hundred miles to go; will it be as dull as this all the time?

The bus is a contemporary of Cortés and his conquistadores. One can see the bush quite clearly through the cracks in its sides. The wire leading from the batteries to the lamps and the bell consists of eight different pieces varying in thickness and very clumsily joined. In the evening, when one of the joints gets disconnected, the driver first holds the two ends together with his left hand, then asks an Indio passenger to hold them for him. Above my head the bus company, in a tropical fit of self-admiration, has fixed a placard with the words: *Confort y Seguridad!* while right under my feet there is a big square hole in the floor, and under the hole I espy the valve of the petrol tank. Therefore, when my neighbour throws a match into the hole I feel uneasy. Instead of observing and trying to locate that uneasiness in me, as I ought to, I turn to him and a futile conversation ensues:

"Gasolino, Señor," I say, pointing at the valve.

He looks at it, then at me and beams with friendliness.

"Si, si, Señor," he says eagerly, and to make his meaning quite clear he adds: "Very good gasolino."

"But it's dangerous, Señor," I persist. "It may explode if a match drops on it."

My remark must sound delightfully naïve to him, for a happy smile spreads over his face.

"Oh no, Señor, oh no, it never explodes," he assures me, vigorously shaking his head, and to clinch the argument he offers me a cigarette. "Please, Señor."

The road surface is excellent: we have no better roads at home. In hilly districts the speed is carefully graded for the down-hill stretches: nine miles for this bit, twelve for that, seventeen for the next. Actually, we

are doing forty, accelerating to forty-five when we get into a patch of mist: the driver reasons—quite logically—that the sooner we are out of the danger zone the better.

The passengers are either Indios or half-castes, all belonging to the poorer classes: men in white cotton shirts and tattered straw hats, women with wrinkled, rigidly-set faces, and a few incredibly tiny babies with heads the size of a big plum and lustrous beady eyes. No one talks, no one moves. Their looks are blank, with that complete absence of thought and emotion which characterises the Hollywood blondes. And cats. Does that mean, I wonder, that they “live the right life”? and that I might learn something from them about the art of living? Somehow I doubt it.

Oddly enough, they do not smell.

After ten hours in a closely-packed bus one is apt to feel hungry, and so at Monterey, where we arrived at three in the morning, I went into a café. It consisted of one huge room of terrific height, dining-room and kitchen combined. A group of Indios were silently playing dice in one corner; in another, a man lay on a bench and snored. The waiter, a youngster, lithe and as beautiful as a tropical god, with the grave dignity of expression and movement that befits a god, brought me some dishes, none of which I could touch, for they were either too peppery or too smelly or both. I ate a lot of bread and paid the bill. “*Gracias, Señor,*” said the young god, pocketing my tip and starting to tidy the table, while I thought of the giddy career he might make as a gigolo in a civilised metropolis, and my heart grew heavy with envy. There was I, an unusually intelligent,

hard-working man, dealing year after year with the deepest feelings and highest thoughts imaginable without ever reaching the lowest income-tax level, an utter stranger to fame, *confort* and *seguridad*; and there was this illiterate boy who, if he came to Paris or London, would in no time become a champion gigolo, dine at the Ritz, drive about in Rolls-Royces and shake hands with famous dramatists, writers, titled ladies—all this by dint of the simplest, stupidest and easiest of all occupations known to mankind. It was unfair, I thought, disgustingly unfair; and envy kept on gnawing until I remembered that for the moment at least the tropical god had not reached those giddy heights of happiness, but was languishing in a filthy hole and earning even less than I did. The relief I experienced at that reflection prompted me to give him a second tip. His second: "*Gracias, Señor,*" was as dignified as the first.

I asked him when the bus for Victoria Ciudad was leaving. Some time in the morning, he said. Where from? From the square, just round the corner; it stayed there the whole night. I went round the corner, but instead of the bus I only found two villainous-looking loafers with the lower part of their faces wrapped in their blankets (there is a special verb in Spanish for that gesture: *embozarse*). We had a short and polite conversation.

"Could you, *por favor*, tell me, Señores, when the bus for Victoria leaves?"

"We don't know, Señor. Perhaps in the morning."

"Does it start from here?"

"Oh no, Señor, no, no."

"Where does it start from then?"

They shrugged their shoulders expressively. A feeling of the deepest regret was written on their faces.

"Does anyone know about the buses?" I asked.

"We can't tell, Señor."

"But there are buses to Victoria?"

"Si, si, Señor, *seguro*." They beamed, they were happy to reassure me at least on this point.

"Thank you, Señores," I said with feeling.

"Don't mention, it, Señor."

I went back to the café and questioned the dice players. "Come along, Señor, I'll show you," said one of them, and took me to the very same spot where I had interviewed the villains. "There, Señor," he said, pointing at a tiny slip of paper which was fixed on the telegraph-pole, and announced that the buses started opposite the church at six thirty. I turned to tip him, but he had vanished, vanished as noiselessly as a cat.

I sat down on a bench in the square and wrapped myself up in my mackintosh. Above my head some tropical tree spread its filigree foliage; a miserable fountain splashed feebly behind me; in front loomed the heavy Gothic silhouette of a church; from afar came the trill of a cicada. "Now I'm really in Mexico," I thought, meaning: "Ain't I smart!" That, of course, was silly boastfulness; I felt ashamed of myself and switched my mind over to the question which had preoccupied me ever since I had left school: the question of Personal Relationships.

There are three mysteries in life which will remain insoluble for ever: creation, personality, and personal relationships. Nobody will ever understand why the world came to be, or why he is what he is and not something different. In the same way nobody will ever know why he is drawn to A and B, but not to C and D. To say, as people often do: I love A *for* this and I am friendly with B *because* of that, is nonsense: C and D may have

the same lovable qualities even more strongly pronounced, and yet I won't so much as look at them. It is just the absence of any Because or For which characterises the personal relationship. When you can put your finger on the reason for the attraction which somebody exercises on you; when you are A's friend because you two match well at golf or laboratory work; or when you love B for her charity work or her apple-dumplings, then the relationship is functional, not personal, and is bound to die with the disappearance of that particular reason which has brought it about. Personal relationships are outside causation: they are self-generating facts.

Whereupon I laughed and asked Lydia whether she minded my calling her a self-generating fact. She said: "Not at all." That she was there, on the bench by my side, was not surprising, for she had promised to meet me half-way. What did surprise me was the heap of cigarette-boxes she was holding in her hands. What were they for? I enquired, and she answered: "Your Xenia gave them to me." I knew at once what she meant, for we always understood each other with a minimum of words. Till the age of thirteen my daughter Xenia often had nightmares. But she was not afraid of them, for she had an unfailing charm: three cubic boxes which she could conjure up at will, whenever something dreadful was about to happen. All she had to do then was to put the top box to the bottom and the bottom one to the top; the nightmare was dispelled and she would start on another pleasanter dream. "That's it," said Lydia, and patted me on the knee. Coming from her the gesture was most shocking, so shocking that I woke up.

As I was opening my eyes I saw two little grey shadows scuttle away from me. They stopped at a few yards distance and turned into two dogs, emaciated ugly dogs

with long lean heads, protruding ribs and whitish eyes. They stood in an attitude of extreme tension, ready for instant flight, staring at me with a look of savage fear. "Mexican dogs," I thought, and clicked my fingers invitingly, but that only made them retreat farther still.

The heavy Spanish Gothic of the church was growing clear against the paling sky.

Another bus, low, ramshackle, overcrowded. Now and again it stops at the mouth of a narrow secretive-looking path emerging from the bush; some Indios alight, others climb in, quietly, slowly, silently. They carry bags, axes, spades, bunches of bananas and bunches of hens, which they hold by the legs, head downwards. On entering the stuffy bus the hens remember that they are alive, and then you have to protect your face against their flapping wings. "Beg your pardon, Señor," says the owner with dreamy politeness as he stuffs the flapping creatures under the seat, where they subside again into a comatose state.

The same bush as the day before, but with more palms and the first organ cacti—perfectly straight green poles growing close together like organ pipes. Here and there some striking-looking flower, dark red, like a clot of blood, or of a tender sky blue. No birds, no smells. Dead brown creepers hang loosely from the trees.

Now and again a village: a dozen miserable shacks, half of which are cafés; Café Triunfo, Café Gloria, Café Emperador. Motionless Indios stare at the bus; pigs waddle about; multi-ribbed mongrels sniff at some invisible filth with alert terror in their whitish eyes. In comparison with the grown-ups, the children seem almost

lively: they chat, laugh, slap each other on the back, and even go through the performance of wrestling. But it is a half-hearted affair: all of a sudden they let go each other and grow serious and silent.

At noon our engine did what it should have done at the very beginning: it broke down. The Indios climbed out, stood around the driver as he dived under the bonnet and stared. No one showed any impatience, no one thought of asking when we would start again. The Norte was blowing and they must have been freezing in their light cotton tunics, for their faces had a bluish hue; but they neither shivered nor unwrapped the blankets they were wearing over their shoulders. Two women moved away to the edge of the road and squatted down neighbourly fashion, one to feed her baby, the other for an even less æsthetic purpose. . . . Mysteries of Montezuma, indeed!

At one of the villages a covey of school-children entered the bus. They stood in the gangway, chatted a little and grew silent. But whenever a sign-post came in view they read aloud in a chorus: Acapetahna, Huitzilapan, Pijijilapam, pronouncing these exotic names with miraculous ease. On leaving they said in a chorus: "*Adios*," and there was a low rumble of *Adios* in response.

We arrived at Victoria after five instead of at midday. I wanted to send a telegram to Lydia, and asked the waiter of the café, where I was eating, how long the post office would be open.

"Till seven-thirty, Señor," he said.

"*Seguro?*"

"*Seguro.*"

After the meal I enquired where the post office was. He explained to me how to find it, and I set off.

"*Un momentito*, Señor." He overtook me. "You want the post office?"

"Yes."

"It is closed, Señor."

"But you said . . ."

"It's Saturday, Señor, and on Saturdays it closes at six."

"Oh," I groaned. "Why didn't you tell me so before? I would have gone there at once."

"Ah, Señor." He looked grave. "Generally, the post office does close at seven-thirty, it's only on Saturdays that it closes earlier."

"So I can't send a telegram?"

"No, Señor." This sadly: he hated to disappoint me.

"Can I send one from Valles?" This being the next big stop.

"Oh yes, Señor. *Seguro*." He beamed.

"But we shan't get to Valles till to-morrow."

"Yes, Señor, to-morrow."

"And it's Sunday to-morrow."

"Yes, Señor, Sunday."

"Aren't the post offices closed on Sundays?"

"They are, Señor." This very sadly and sympathetically.

Enlisting my best Spanish in the service of my sarcasm, I told the Señor waiter that he had been most helpful indeed, and that in general the *confort*, *seguridad* and *eficiencia* (I was not sure whether the word exists, but it sounded right) which a traveller encounters all over his glorious country exceed the limits of human imagination. The waiter had clearly no idea what I was talking about, but he was polite, politer than I, and his: "*Gracias*, Señor," uttered with simple dignity, made me

feel a fool. To counteract that feeling I offered him a cigarette and asked him some superfluous and uninteresting questions. We parted friends.

Night driving. The Indios wag their heads, dozing or staring hypnotically at the lighted ribbon of asphalt as it is sucked in by the radiator of the coach. The window-pane by my side rattles unbearably: I stuff a whole newspaper into the chinks between the glass and the frame, but that does not help. Too tired to sleep I start a conversation with my neighbour, a middle-class half-caste traveller in furniture. Like most bourgeois in Mexico he is dressed very heavily, and has a bloated pear-shaped face. I learn that he is going to call at the Chichicastle sugar works. They buy mats from him; last time he sold them four dozen mats, twenty-four pesos commission, not bad, eh? Very big works (this with respect): they get electricity from Valles, sixty miles away, and employ nine hundred *obreros*. He wishes to know the English for *obrero* and I tell him: Workman. "Vorkkemenn," he repeats several times with gusto. "Vorkkemenn, is that right?" He would like to learn English, but has no time. A friend of his knows English and has got a good job on the strength of it, a very good job; and once more satisfaction sounds in his voice.

After a few minutes of this talk I begin to feel bored, and since I must not feel bored I pretend to sleep. What is it that makes the bourgeois in Mexico as cruelly boring as he is in Petersburg, Petrograd, London, Paris, Lenin-grad? As time passes and my fatigue grows I become increasingly conscious of the traveller next to me, and the more I am aware of him the more I hate him—him and the

other passengers, all Indios, all Mexicans. A hopeless country, a stupid race. They are said to have been oppressed for centuries. Serve them right; what else are they good for? I wish I could take the bloody fools one by one, give them a good kick and throw them out on to the road. . . .

Then I remember: since I cannot kick them out, my hatred is a sheer waste of energy and therefore must be stopped. Stopped at the source, which in this particular case is neither intellect nor emotion, but the body, my aching muscles and bones. Thank goodness I know now how to locate my sensations, or at least some of them. I had no idea how to do it four years ago, when Miriam dropped me: I mistook the pain which I experienced then for emotional pain, for the protest of my "moral" being against the inconsiderate way in which she had treated me; and accordingly I tried to cure myself of that pain by emotional arguments, I spent days wondering how she could be so cruel and heartless and whether she had ever loved me or only pretended to. Which was quite off the point and did not bring me any relief, since as a matter of fact my pain came not from my emotional self, but from my body, from the frustration of its desire. . . .

After this digression I turn my mind to the task in hand and proceed to watch in a special way those parts of my body which protest the loudest against discomfort, to wit: the small of my back, my behind and my shoulder-blades. It is a boring occupation, but only at first, so long as I do not concentrate enough; when I do, it becomes quite interesting, heaven knows why. I do not attempt to persuade my muscles that it is good for them to have their habits violated by a bumpy bus and a hard seat—the body is far too self-willed to be amenable to any

intellectual argument; I just observe them with a maximum of concentration, at the same time reminding my emotional self that neither the bloated traveller in particular nor Mexico in general have anything to do with me or my irritation, which is but a by-product of inner friction in my Great Body. And gradually that irritation subsides; I forget Mexico and fall asleep. Q.E.D.

In Valles, at the foot of the plateau, I felt I had enough of primitive life and took a first-class coach. In respect of *confort* and *seguridad* it differed very little from the second class, but it had a stronger engine and was scheduled to do the two hundred and fifty miles to Mexico City in eleven hours.

The southern slopes of the Mexican plateau did not seem very impressive to me, who a few months earlier had feasted my eyes on the grandiose massif of Mont Blanc. What I saw now were hills rather than mountains, huge hills reminiscent of the Lake District. One in particular was exactly the shape of Skiddaw, only a little higher. "Is that all?" I wondered disappointedly.

The ascent began at once. The mist vanished, and for the first time I beheld the tropical sun, bright with a whiteness that hurt the eye. We were climbing very fast for a bus, and I reckoned we should be on the top in half an hour, but an hour passed, two hours, and we were still climbing. A sign-post announced that we were at an altitude of 9,500 feet, yet Skiddaw was still towering high above us. I began to realise how deceptive spatial estimates are in the Mexican highlands. Below, one could distinctly see every fold of the valley we had started

from; yet the wide river that ran through it was invisible: distance had made it shrink to nothing. A wide panorama had opened out, a panorama of thousands of green peaks, but they all looked so near and clear that one had to do some reasoning to realise that the farthest of them must be 150 miles away and 13,000 or 14,000 feet high: one is used to associate height with bare steep rocks and snow, whereas these mountains had gentle slopes all the way up and were green to the very top.

A minor ridge is crossed and we are on the plateau. It is like passing to another planet. A huge circular valley spreads out, surrounded by a ridge of truncated cones, with more cones of smaller size growing here and there out of the flat expanse of the valley. The dense tropical vegetation is left behind; one only sees sparse stunted bushes, yellow grass burnt by the sun, tall prickly pears writhing in cataleptic torment, and bald patches of coloured soil, yellow, brown, pink, purple. On the moon there must be such landscapes as this.

Villages are rarer here than in the Hot Country below. The poverty is extreme: the huts, or rather the kennels, are built of rotten boards of uneven length, some of which miss the roof by several inches. There are huts in which an organ cactus plays duty for one of the walls. The floor is earthen; one sees no beds and no bedclothes; yet it freezes here at night. A horse or even a mule must be a luxury, for in the middle of the valley, some twenty miles from the nearest village, one often meets Indios shuffling along at a trot with bunches of rotten logs on their backs or baskets of maize in their hands. They are undersized and very thin, but they can trot for ten or twelve hours without stopping, this with a burden of sixty pounds. And the sun is glorious.

At the foot of the next ridge two soldiers climb on to

the roof of the coach and settle on the luggage with their rifles—and a guitar. "Many bandits here," explains a passenger to me. As we drive off the roof creaks ominously under the extra weight, and I wonder whether the bandits can be as dangerous as our protectors.

We cross another circular valley with silly-looking cones planted on its flat bottom and start ascending a ridge, when the coach stops suddenly and the driver climbs out. An old cart has been left right across the road on a sharp turn, with a precipice on one side and a steep purple rock on the other. "An ideal place for an ambush," I think, and no sooner have I thought that than something strange happens. The driver, after having made a few steps, stumbles, falls and lies quiet on the asphalt; a second passes before the brain connects his fall with the report which preceded it. Two more reports follow in rapid succession; the roof of the coach shakes, and something heavy plops down to the ground with a thud: one of the soldiers must have been shot down. His comrade yells, his rifle drops on the asphalt with a metallic clatter. A short pause; then three men, their faces muffled up to their eyes, emerge from behind the purple rock and trot up to us. One with a gun and another with a revolver stop by the stepping-board, while the third—apparently the leader—throws the door open. "Come out, all of you," he says quietly and very seriously. The passengers stare at him and do not move. "Hurry up," he encourages them in a dry business-like voice. The Indio on the front seat gets up and lazily, sedately, as though he were going to dig potatoes, climbs out; two bandits approach him and go through his pockets. "The next," and another Indio gets out and is searched. It is done efficiently, quietly, in dead earnest, without any superfluous movement or gestures. "The

next." After that one it will be my turn; they will take away my receipt for the deposit, £14 in English money and my Browning, damn them. And then I notice that the first bandit, finding it cumbersome to search the passengers while holding a rifle, has leant it against the rock, while his comrade, moved by the same consideration, has stuck his revolver back into his belt, so that only one of them, the leader, is ready for instant action. Perception in critical moments is speeded up fantastically; with the rapidity of lightning I calculate my chances. To shoot down the fellow is easy: bad shot though I am I cannot miss him at two yards. But what then? Can I hit the other two before either of them has had time to fire back? For if not, I am done for: they must be good shots. My inside shrivels up with nauseating fear, but within that fear is throbbing the angry thought of my money, which I won't give up, I won't, I won't. Taking advantage of the moment when the third Indio is passing in front of me, I draw my Browning and—with a jerk I come round, a wave of shame wells up in me. How stupid, how idiotic! The author of eight intelligent books, the earnest thinker who practises a Yoga of his own, the father of a marriageable girl, indulging in a fantasy of the *Modern Boy* kind! and getting excited in the process: short breath, quickened pulse, thoughts a-whirl. Oh Lord! does one never grow up wholly? must one always carry the discarded mind of the child within oneself? Covertly I glance at my neighbours, hoping that they have not detected my disgraceful slip—and pull myself up for the second time. No, shame is childish, too, just as childish as romantic day-dreaming; the thing to do is to get out of my disorganised mind—to dissociate. So I make my mind blank by gazing at the blue sky, I breathe evenly, and when the physical agitation in

me has calmed down, I pull an imaginary elastic with my double at its end and make him turn round. He looks at me for a while, then he says: "Never mind that little lapse. It is always the present and the future you should think of, and not the past. Just now you might ask yourself what the meaning of your being here is and what you propose to do with the remaining six hours of your journey." And because he is looking at me I know at once what to answer: "I am here to give a rest to my emotion and intellect, to take in impressions as they come, passively, without judging them. I have got any amount of ideas and values, but for the duration of this trip I wish to forget all about them and live uncritically, just live. Like a cat." He nods approvingly, and as I need him no longer I dismiss him and draw in the elastic.

PART THREE

“Delighted to see you, my dear Friday!” exclaimed Robinson with emphatic friendliness as he stepped out from behind a rock. “Somehow I knew that this place was pregnant with human relationships.”

—From *The Modern Robinson* (I. F. Tavrov).

I WENT up the steps of the dark veranda, pressed the bell, and looked back. Across the road, beyond what seemed to be a huge empty site, the million lights of Mexico City were winking very fast, as lights do in the South. Above them the crescent of the moon, strangely white and bright, was lying in an unfamiliar position, right on its belly, with both its horns on one level.

Steps were heard inside the house, and the hall resounded with polyphonic barking and children's voices.

"Bang-Ho, be quiet!"

"*Será el correo.*"

"*Qué correo!*"

"Don't let them out, Jim."

The door opened, and a boy peered out, screwed up his eyes. "Whom d'you wahnt?" he asked with a strong American accent.

"Can I see Mr. or Mrs. Donovan?"

He glanced at my case and rucksack and flung up his arms in an unmistakably Russian gesture.

"Hullo, ahrrnt you Mr. Gubsky?" he cried. "Come right in. You see, we didn't expect. . . ."

I ceased to hear him because Lydia had come out and I was kissing her hands, her eyes, her temples, then her hands again, thin long unforgettable hands, which were quivering like live birds, and all the while I had to repeat to myself: This is not a dream, not a dream. . . .

When I raised my head the veranda was brightly lit,

and three children were watching me with frank curiosity. Behind them, grinning sheepishly, stood Cecil, Lydia's husband. I shook hands with them all.

"Oh, but why didn't you let us know?" cried Lydia, exaggerating her disappointment in an effort to counteract the riotous happiness which vibrated in her voice and shone in her eyes. "We've finished dinner, and now you'll have to wait."

She was the same as before, looking older, of course, and yet in everything that mattered the same Lydia I had known ages ago. The chasm of space and time that had been separating us had closed up, disappeared, as though it had never existed.

"Gosh, you are sunburnt!" I said irrelevantly, staring at her. "And so thin, thinner than you were."

"Am I?" She smiled. "But let's go in, it's too cold here."

They all spoke at once:

"Mother, shall I tell Antonia?"

"Don't let the dogs out." The dogs were scratching excitedly at the door from the inside.

"Oh, Xenia, you're pushing me."

"Bang-Ho, keep quiet!"

After the squalor of the ship and the Mexican cafés it was queer to find oneself in a decent house, sitting at a table with a clean cloth on it and eating real Russian Borshtch with slices of sausage in it. "Our Antonia knows how to cook," said Lydia, and we both smiled, because her remark and the note of proprietary pride in her voice were funnily out of keeping with what we both felt. The three children sat along the wall, and with concentrated interest watched me eat. Cecil had fetched his whisky from the drawing-room and was sipping at his glass. He was a tall man of fifty, strongly built, with

a bumpy face, a heavy jaw and kind eyes, one of those faces which attract not in spite of but because of their roughness. He was managing director of an American mining company, and I knew from Lydia—who never exaggerates—that his Mexican subordinates liked him much better than they did their native bosses. I knew we should be friends, we were friends already.

Technically speaking, our conversation was a failure: Lydia and I had so much to say to each other that we did not know where to begin. We would ask a question, start answering it, and break off half-way because, when uttered, the answer seemed irrelevant. What did it matter how I had travelled, where Lydia's two big girls were, how many friends she had in Mexico? The important thing was that her eyes—that is to say her soul—had not changed in the least; their look was the same as twenty-seven years ago, it had the same intelligent attention and warmth in it, and it was saying now what she had once written to me: that whatever I might do or fail to do she would remain my friend unquestioningly, unreservedly. . . . Antonia's chocolate *soufflé* was a marvel.

We moved to the drawing-room. It was high ceilinged, simply furnished, with enormous logs burning in the fireplace, some photographs on the walls and bunches of queer tropical plants in the vases: thick juicy stems of gentle pink with crimson veins in them, as though they were filled with blood. Lydia told me their name, which I immediately forgot. "Wonderful! Amazing!" I said, and she smiled: she understood that I was not referring to the flowers. Then an expression of anxiety came into her eyes.

"But you are shivering, Nikolai. Have you got a cold? Oh, that would be a pity."

"No, it's only fatigue," I said. "I've hardly slept for three nights, and these country coaches. . . ."

"Then you must go to bed at once," she decided with an authoritativeness which was new to me, for it was the outcome of motherhood. "Finish your cigarette and go. This altitude is treacherous; it's easy to fall ill when you aren't acclimatised."

Ten minutes later I was in my room, undressing with shaking hands. My room, my Mexican room—the idea did not seem a bit strange. I had always known there was a room waiting for me here; it was only the ocean that had prevented me from using it. For years and years Lydia and I had been living with thousands of miles between us, but all that time our lives had been following a parallel course, so that I had only to cross the ocean to find myself just as close to her as before, within an arm's reach. . . . Curling up in my bed and pulling the blanket over my head, I remembered the chocolate *soufflé* and felt a pang of regret at the thought that I might have had a third helping. "Sweets are Antonia's speciality," Lydia had said, and there was a slight American distortion in her pronunciation of the last word: spaciahlity. And I must not fall ill, I must not, and I won't, because I am happy, and happiness makes one immune from all microbes. It is quite easy to be happy—why had I not discovered that before? You just burrow your head into the soft pillow, let your legs swim away from you, your arms melt, and then all that is left is a wonderful melody which comes both from far away and from inside you and fills your mind and your body. . . .

The white warmth of the morning sun inundates the

veranda, the naked apricot tree in the garden, the grey asphalt of Avenida Sevilla and the large site beyond it—a square mile of Mexican desert with dead brown grass, some sickly *pulque* cacti and a pepper-tree, under which there is a patch of white: hoar-frost. Farther still, one sees the young bluish eucalyptuses of the National Park; beyond them, a cloud of dust hovering over the city, and the violet ridge of the hills. They seem quite close, within a few hours' walk, but as a matter of fact one would not reach them in a day. To the left, in another sector of the circular ridge, Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl, the two snow-capped volcanoes, their contours faint as Japanese etchings, slowly emerge from the morning haze.

Three dogs bask on the tiled floor. Two are Mexican, that is to say, they have whitish eyes and belong to all races at once. The third is a Pitbull, a cross between a bull-terrier and a bulldog, twice as formidable as either, with the chest of a pony and round bloodshot eyes. Being old, he is particular about the temperature: now and again he gets up with a snort and shuffles into the sun or back into the shade, his hindquarters sagging, every movement of his testifying to pain.

"What is wrong with him?" I ask Lydia. For we have given up trying to talk about important things: it simply would not do.

"Old age, I suppose. We really ought to put him to sleep, but the children would be upset."

She is sitting in a deck-chair smoking. Her skin is almost black, for she never puts on a hat and never shuns the sun. She is wearing a simple white blouse, short socks and tennis shoes, but even in that democratic attire she looks every inch a lady.

"His mother," she continues, nodding at Bang-Ho,

"was a historical dog. You haven't heard of Mrs. Evans, have you?"

"No."

"Mrs. Evans was the woman who, during the Revolution, some fifteen years ago, defended her estate against the Junta and the peasants. They attacked her *hacienda* several times, but with the help of her servants she beat them off. They laid ambushes for her, killed off half her servants, and in the end got her. Bang-Ho's mother was her watch-dog and saved her life once by knocking down an Indio just as he was taking aim at Mrs. Evans. When she died, a friend of hers, Mr. Link, an English engineer, took the bitch with him to his camp: he was building a power-station in the jungle. One day the bandits kidnapped him and the bitch and took them into the hills, for ransom. But Link soon managed to escape. Instead of going to town he went back to the power-station; it was a risky thing to do, but he didn't want to leave the dog in the lurch: he calculated that if she were to run away from the bandits she would make her way to the power-station. And so she did; she was back a week later, quite worn out and with a shot wound in her leg. Link nursed her day and night, and finally she recovered, just in time to produce our Bang-Ho. Now, the funny thing is that Bang-Ho can't bear the sound of a report. He's terribly brave. I'm sure he would attack a tiger if he met one; but when shooting begins on holidays or there are fireworks or a car back-fires in the street, poor Bang-Ho gets all dithery with fear: he crawls under the sofa and nothing can drag him out. . . . No, thank you, we don't want anything to-day."

This is addressed to an Indio vendor who has stopped at the gate. Lydia's "No" failing to convince him, he puts his basket down on the ground and opens negotia-

tions. Perhaps the Señorita would like some sweet *papas* (potatoes)? Very good *papas*, fresh and nice and cheap. No, thank you, says the Señorita. And what about a *papaya*, he wishes to know? The Señorita thanks him once more and announces that she has two *papayas* already, if not three. Fresh strawberries then, straight from Xochimilco, the very best strawberries in existence? No, no and no, says the Señorita with a maximum of emphasis. And now the man gives it up; he stares at us with a sad and serious look, then slowly picks up his basket and shuffles on.

"They call all women Señoritas," says Lydia. "It's considered polite."

"They are very polite, I've noticed that."

"Yes. It's their nature."

A crescendo of noise is heard, indicative of the approach of the children, and a few moments later two of them appear on the veranda: Jim, a boy of fifteen, with the unnaturally heavy swaying he-man's gait often affected at that age, his mother's intelligent grey eyes, and a look of perpetual preoccupation on his face; and Xenia, a girl of fourteen, tall, slim, pretty, coltishly graceful. They have seen me the night before and I have already lost all exotic interest for them, they are full of their own affairs now.

"Motherr, can I ahsk the Simpsons . . . ?"

"Motherr, can I have a peso? I want . . ."

"Oh wait, Jim, don't interrupt."

"Wait yourself . . . You see, Motherr, it's *Prisionero de Zenda* to-day and . . ."

"Motherr, can I?"

Lydia raises her hand to enjoin silence.

"The Simpsons?" she says to Xenia. "No, my dear, you can't have them; you had them the day before yester-

day, and they are terribly noisy . . . The cinema?" This to the boy. "No, you've been to the cinema two days running and that's more than enough."

Xenia pouts, twisting her lips until they assume a diagonal position; the light of excitement dies out of her eyes; with her forehead pathetically wrinkled she suddenly looks quite plain. "Oh, Motherr, and I've told the Simpsons . . ." she whines.

"Oh, shut up about the Simpsons!" snaps the boy. "Motherr, if I don't go to *Prisionero*. . . ."

Once more Lydia raises her hand.

"That'll do," she says in a harder voice. "I said No, and we needn't discuss the matter any further. Now be off. Off with you!"

With stifled sounds of protest the two slink away.

"Quite efficiently done," I observe. "Great economy of means. I shouldn't have thought you were so good at exercising authority."

"But I'm not good at it. Simply they are good children."

"Happen to be?" I prompt.

"Yes, happen to be. Xenia is rather difficult just now, but that's on account of her age. . . . You know they can't pronounce her name here and call her all sorts of things."

"Zenna and Keesenna and Aseekenna?"

"How do you know?" Lydia's eyebrows go up with surprise. "Has she told you?"

"No, but it's the same with my Xenia in England. . . . She's a nice girl, your Xenia I mean."

"She is. She was horrid as a child, though. Terribly obstinate. When she started screaming nothing could stop her. I used to lock her up in the bathroom but she kept on screaming and howling for hours."

"I know. Nadya used to put our Xenia on a chest of

drawers, switch off the light and leave her in the dark. Even that didn't help."

"When she was ten she began to dramatise herself," continues Lydia. "After a row she would come up to me and whimper: Mother, forgive me, oh please. I would say she was forgiven, but that wasn't enough; what she wanted was a sentimental reconciliation, with tears and wet kisses. And I loathe that sort of thing. So she would go on whimpering, and I would sit and pretend to read. It was a kind of competition between us as to who would hold out longer. On one occasion it lasted from dinner till supper—would you believe it? For six hours she kept repeating the same thing: 'Motherr, forgive me,' with tears slowly rolling down her cheeks."

"Sign of character."

"I wonder. . . . Towards the end I was trembling all over and had to put down the book so as not to give myself away. Well, I'm glad to say *c'est moi qui l'ai emporté*. Just before supper she burst out sobbing properly, and then I gave her a hanky and asked her whether she was hungry. 'Yes, Motherr,' she squeaked. . . . She hasn't done it since, I must say; she's much better now. And she is wonderful when she's ill, really angelic. 'No, Motherr, don't botherr to stay with me. Dinner? Oh, anything will do, I shall eat whatever you want me to eat.' It's almost frightening, and sometimes I think the child will die, she's too good to live. . . . But why are we talking English the whole time?"

"Probably because you spoke to the children in English."

"Let's talk Russian. Tell me about yourself."

That proved not easy at all. There was so much to tell that I did not know where to begin. Besides, all the biggest events of my life I have put down in my auto-

biography, and once I have broached a subject in one of my books it becomes taboo to me.

"To begin with," I said, "I want to assure you that, for a change, I'm not going to fall in love with you this time. Three times is quite enough.

"I'm so glad," she said with feeling. "It would be wrong somehow. I'm a middle-aged woman and . . ."

"Age doesn't matter. The point is that it would spoil our meeting. So I don't want it, and it won't happen."

"I am glad," she repeated. "Frankly speaking, I was a bit afraid on that score. Your last letter . . ."

"You mean the exuberant manner in which it was written? Oh, that's just my style."

All of a sudden Bang-Ho emits a fierce growl, jumps up and with the acceleration of a borzoi, dashes down the steps of the veranda. The two mongrels rush after him, yapping frantically.

"Not bad for a paralytic," I observe.

From our elevated position we see the cause of this agitation: a Mexican dog which has ventured too close to the gate and is now fleeing hell for leather into the desert. It soon becomes apparent that he is gaining rapidly on his pursuers; Bang-Ho realises this, gives up the chase, trots back and stretches out on the veranda with much panting and groaning.

"He's a born killer," says Lydia. "Last month he killed five dogs—Jim counted them."

"Doesn't he get you into trouble?"

"No. One day a fat Mexican woman came along and was very apologetic. At first we thought that her dog had killed Bang-Ho, but as a matter of fact it was the other way round."

"Why then was she apologetic?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

The appearance of Mary, the youngest, provides another intermezzo. She is ten, sturdily built, square-shouldered. She walks swaying from side to side, with firm solid steps, like a grown-up, and has an unusually steady look for a child of her age. In her arms she is carrying a doll dressed Mexican fashion, with a wide sombrero. Too wide a sombrero, for it slides off the doll's head all the time.

"Motherr, what shall I do with it?" she asks. "Shall I fahsten a ribbon round it? Or an elahstic?"

Lydia inspects the hat and decides in favour of an elastic. Mary fetches her work-basket, and a minute later the work is done.

"Yes, that's better," says Mary with grave approval. "Thank you, Motherr."

Unhurriedly, she puts her arms round Lydia's neck, gives her a firm kiss, and with her purposeful tread goes down into the garden, pressing the doll to her chest.

"I'm going to Chérie's now in case you should want me," she announces from the gate.

"A personality," is my comment. "She's more interesting than the other two."

"Yes, definitely a personality."

"She has your attentive look and your independence."

"I hope she has more of it, I hadn't much. I only pretended I had."

"Nonsense. You had plenty."

"That's what you thought. But you weren't observant then. . . . By the way I must tell you that the Lydia you've drawn in your first novel isn't a flattering portrait at all. She's a prig, an exasperating prig. You say all the time she's a wonder, but all one knows is that she sits and stares at . . . what do you call yourself in the novel?"

"Kanshin."

"Stares at Kanshin. She never does or says anything intelligent."

"But, my dear, you didn't say anything intelligent. Not then. That was my trouble when I was writing about you. I had to show a personality which hadn't found itself yet, a woman *im Werden*. Consider the extreme reserve you showed in your relationship with me. Remember our talks. You were great at understanding, but as soon as you started talking yourself you would get entangled in words and cry: 'Oh, I don't know how to say it.' There was nothing tangible about you then, you were but a promise, not a fulfilment."

She smokes, lost in thought. A whirlwind arises in the desert before us, a straight vertical pillar of dust like smoke going up on a very calm day. Only by watching the pillar intently does one notice that it is moving. The sun shines hotter and hotter; Bang-Ho definitely moves into the shade.

"What is personality?" asks Lydia.

"It can't be defined. Like beauty. You feel it when it's there, that's all one can say."

"Sometimes you feel it when it isn't there."

"True. That happens to beauty too."

The momentum of the old times comes into action and I grow eloquent, more eloquent than I have been for years. As in Petersburg, Lydia does not contribute much to the conversation, she just listens and understands. Sometimes, carried away by my oratorical fervour, I overstate my case (I never do it in books, but am apt to do it in conversation). Then she pulls me up.

Suddenly Bang-Ho, who was dozing on the lawn, goes wild once more. Springing up with juvenile alacrity, he rushes at the apricot-tree and tries to climb up it. His

acolytes wake up and bark: from their bewildered faces one infers that they have no idea as to the cause of the excitement. Nor have I.

"Has he got sunstroke or what?" I ask.

Lydia smiles. Hers is a restrained smile which confines itself to the eyes. Her lips remain closed and only quiver a little. The muscles, I surmise, are still bound by the inhibition of some big effort in the past.

"No, he's after a lizard," she says. "See there, on the lower branch? . . . But what about our going for a walk? To the park for instance?"

"Are there many people in the park?" I ask with apprehension.

"Heavens, no! I suppose it was made specially for us, because no one else ever goes there. That's why," she adds with her characteristic mild humour, "it's called Parque Nacional."

Only in the park, amidst the cedar-trees with drooping furry twelve-inch-long needles and the grey tortured ugliness of the cacti, away from the dust permanently hanging over the parched roads, does one see what the Mexican sky is like. At first, when looking at that unbelievable, impossible blue, so deep that it kills all the colour of the verdure, one does not trust one's senses and thinks it must be an optical illusion. Neither in Russia nor in France nor in Italy have I seen that intense blue, the result of altitude and extreme dryness. The sun looks different, too, neither gold nor silver, but perfectly white with hardly any aura around it, all its brilliancy condensed in the orb itself. I sigh and stare.

"That's what compensates us foreigners for the

nuisances of the life here," says Lydia. "People who have lived here for a long time always long to come back, even if they are fed up with the Mexicans. This sky grows on you."

"I quite believe it."

This is the first time I have appreciated the beauty of the sky by itself, apart from clouds and landscape, just the pure blue ocean of air without substance, shape or motion. Lost in contemplation, I forget Lydia and we walk in silence. She knows what I am feeling and does not speak.

Our path goes up a gentle slope. When we have reached the top Lydia stops and says in Russian: "Ouuff": at 8,000 feet one easily gets out of breath. The soil is as hard as stone: the dust on the path sends up a white glare which hurts the eye.

"You really ought to wear dark spectacles here," says Lydia.

"Too much bother. Besides, then I wouldn't see properly."

We descend to the bottom of a ravine and settle there on a fallen tree. The view at this spot is narrowed down by abrupt walls of yellow stone.

"Now tell me about your work," says Lydia, when I have come round from my celestial absorption. "How are you getting on?"

I tell her that I have achieved literary success, but my books do not sell well. Why? Nobody knows. Perhaps because I cannot be labelled: I am neither solemn nor frivolous, neither Communist nor Conservative, in fact, neither flesh, fowl, nor good red herrring. Perhaps it is simply a matter of chance, the same chance which makes one kind of liver pills a success and another, consisting of the same soap and soda, a failure.

"Do you feel bitter about it?" she asks.

"Not about my lack of popularity—that doesn't bother me in the least. But I do feel bitter about my lack of money. Less and less though."

"Do you think your last book will sell? What is it about by the way?"

I tell her about Mara, my gypsy heroine, her volcanic temperament, her courage, her wild fantasies, her adventures.

"That ought to sell," says Lydia.

"It won't. She's genuine, and people want gypsies to be melodramatic, with fatal passions, rolling eyes and deadly daggers."

She keeps silent for a while. There is usually an interval between my words and her next remark or question.

"So there is nothing of yourself in the book?" she asks.

"No, nothing. Why?"

Another pause. Then: "It's a pity. I think you should give yourself in your books. That's your *forte*."

"I have been doing so for seven years, but judging by the sales the greater public isn't impressed by my Ego."

"All the same you must give yourself. You must, because you have a lot to say in the way of positive, constructive stuff, more than almost any modern writer I know. Has nobody told you that?"

"A few of my literary correspondents have. But . . ."

"Don't you feel that yourself?"

"Sometimes I do, when I remember how frightfully little most writers have to say, even the best of them. But the sales, damn them, the sales! That positive stuff you mean only appeals to intelligent people, and they are neither numerous nor rich enough to keep me going. . . . But let's not talk books under this amazing sky. I'm sure

if it were painted exactly as it is people would say: That can't be true."

We look at the sky, then we get up and walk back. I watch her out of the corner of my eye. Very erect, with her head poised proudly, yet naturally, she walks without any visible effort, as though her body had no weight at all, her thin long arms swinging with a peculiar angular grace. I remember the thrill which walking with her used to give me in Russia. Now I experience no thrill, only a quiet even pleasure with an admixture of admiration. And I find I do not want the thrill, I am better without it.

"Do you remember our first meeting?" she asks. "Not the one you describe in *The Gladiator*, but the one before that."

"Was there one?"

"Yes, in Sebastopol. When you were in the Navy. Remember?"

"No."

"It was on the quay. You and the Smirnovs and I were there, waiting for a launch, and Mrs. Smirnov introduced us. We were in a hurry, because it looked like a thunderstorm Balaclava way, and there was a big squashed frog on the quay. Have you forgotten?"

"Absolutely."

"Even the frog?"

"Even the frog."

She looks at me with humorous compassion. "And you call yourself a writer!"

In the afternoon she took me to the city on a shopping expedition. We paid twopence for a drive of eight miles

in an over-crowded bus along Reforma, probably the smartest street in the world. The city was what one would expect it to be: noisy, stuffy, teeming with Indios, mestizos and cars. Whenever there occurred a hitch in the traffic all the cars began to blow their horns and kept on blowing them till the road was clear. On account of the dust the sun shone no more brightly than it does in London.

The Green Market—rows of stands laden with an infinite variety of odd-looking tropical fruit, vegetables and flowers. Unhurried, noiseless efficiency: retail trade is the only form of economic activity which the Mexicans have mastered. You choose what you want, you ask: How much? and either you nod to show that you take the thing or you pass on. When an American lady who did not know the rules of the game started to haggle, the Indio vendor just shifted his eyes from her face to a point above her head and kept them fixed on that point until, disconcerted, she removed herself. It was done very effectively.

The grocery. "*Zdrasste, Madame,*" says the owner, a corpulent Jew from Kharkov, and in a mixture of good Russian and bad Spanish he enquires about Lydia's health, Señor Donovan, the children and what Madame would like to-day. The usual things, says Madame in her Americanised English, whereupon he produces a note-book and moistens the pencil with his lips (shopkeepers always did that in Russia). Five kilos of rice, dictates Madame, lighting a cigarette; half a kilo of salt; two tins of Supremo biscuits; three dozen eggs; and so on. The sheet is filled with items; the Jew turns the page; Madame goes on dictating at a terrific speed straight from memory, but as fluently as though she were reading from a note: Ten kilos of sugar; one jar of mustard; one of Chili pepper. Then the Russian stuff: a loaf of black bread; ten salt

cucumbers; a brace of hazelhens (imported from Finland, if you please); a jar of pickled mushrooms (*anglice* toadstools, the same which I gather every year on Wimbledon Common). Thank you, Mr. Cohen, that's all.

In the street I say to her:

"This aspect of you is new to me. Lydia the business woman. I must say you displayed a high degree of efficiency."

She is obviously flattered, but conceals her feelings under a cloak of modesty.

"With a large family one has to be. When all the children are at home and my brother and his wife and her sister are staying with us, we sit down eleven at table. And you can't imagine what a lot eleven people eat, especially when half of them are young. Besides, I've had a business training, I was a book-keeper once."

"When was that?"

"In nineteen-eighteen, under the Bolsheviks. Everyone had to work then, so I got a job in the accountancy department of the Moscow railway office. After a year they made me the head of a section and I had eighteen girls under me."

"But you knew nothing about book-keeping!"

"Not at first. But one can learn if one has brains."

I glance at her with respect. There are many intelligent women, many business women, many womanly women; but the combination of the three in one is rare. And I happen to like rare combinations. In Petersburg the man who had most influence on me was the kindest man on earth, a baby in practical affairs of his own, one of the best legal brains in Russia and a genius of psychological analysis. In London I have a friend, a sea captain, a man built on heroic lines who is also an ex-revolutionary and a dreamer fond of religious and

ethical discussions. Yet another of my friends, a woman, is a practical Christian in the best sense of the word and at the same time a clear-headed agnostic without a grain of sentimentality about her. Once a shipowner whom I knew but slightly said in my presence: "It is a disgusting régime which allows me to occupy this huge house while my chauffeur with a family of seven has to live in a tiny cottage"—and ever since I have felt an affection for the man. That is why to my mind Lawrence of Arabia is the greatest man of the century. For he combines the maximum of qualities, he is almost everything man can be: a scientist, a general, an artist, a loyal friend, a thinker and a self-made Yogi. He is the only attempt nature has made since Leonardo da Vinci to produce a superman. One thing is lacking in Lawrence: the lover. But then, as history shows, sex has for some reason to be silent in the very great ones: da Vinci, like Christ, was androgynous.

A car-load of visitors came in the afternoon and gave an exhibition of the same standardised automatism which one encounters in any "decent" drawing-room south and north of the equator: mechanical smiles without a trace of emotion behind them; mechanical gestures, copies of gestures observed in other decent people; mechanical talk, words chosen for no other reason than that they were habitual, had been repeated five hundred or five thousand times. I ate four pieces of Antonia's excellent apple cake, slunk out, and went to the park to gape at the furry bunches of cedar needles against the fantastic blue of the sky. When I returned the visitors were gone.

"Thank heaven for that " I said. "I take it they were the crème of the élite in Mexico City."

An amused smile was playing in Lydia's eyes: she knew beforehand what I would say.

"It's their uniformity that is so depressing," I said, sliding unconsciously into the sarcastic manner of my Petersburg days. "The same standard type reproduced a million times. The mass-men. Somehow it's particularly jarring to meet them under this marvellous sky: they oughtn't to be allowed to live here."

"I see you are just as intolerant as you were in Russia," said Lydia, continuing to smile.

"And why shouldn't I be? My intolerance is harmless, I never say a word that might offend them. I simply keep away from them."

"It's your loss." This without a smile. "They are nice people on the whole—some of them very nice—and one can get a lot out of them if one takes the trouble."

"I disagree with 'a lot.' You may get a little at the cost of a prodigious effort. But is the game worth the candle? I don't think it is. Take novels. Every novel that has ever been written contains some valuable passages or at least sentences—every one, without exception. But that doesn't make them worth reading, does it? If you want to read you pick out one which has much more than the average amount of good stuff in it, and you shove the rest aside: Rubbish, you say. That's what I do with people. I choose those in whom I find, or hope to find, more than the average amount of value, and ignore the rest. My time being limited, I have no business to waste it on picking up tiny grains at the rate of two an hour."

"Somehow that sounds egoistic," remarked Lydia uncertainly.

"I disagree again. Firstly, the word egoism has no meaning because . . . but we needn't go into that now. And secondly, we are all so made that, whether we like it or not, we can only give ourselves to those whom we appreciate. That may be unfair, but it's a fact we can't alter. You, for instance, may try ever so hard, but you'll never be able to give that long-nosed female with a screechy voice half of what you give me. Isn't that so?"

She did not answer. Instead she asked after a pause:

"You used the word 'value.' What value do you mean?"

I chuckled: this was exactly like one of our conversations in Petersburg: the uplifter and his disciple.

"Anything you consider valuable for yourself, I for myself and so on. Absolute values don't exist, they are cerebral fictions which people invent and cultivate in order to justify their fighting each other. And it's only natural that one should try and get one's values in a pure state, without any admixture of rubbish. Just as you try to get pure bread. If your bread contains a lot of sand you'll suffer from indigestion; and if there is much rubbish in the people you associate with you'll suffer from boredom, which is mental indigestion."

"It depends on you whether you are bored or not."

"Quite. That's why I run away from such assemblies as the one you had to-day. If you aren't so easily bored as I am that's your luck. . . How do you do it by the way?"

"Do what?"

"How do you manage to put up with people who mean nothing to you?"

"Oh, that's simple. I keep a set of gramophone records for these occasions. I put on one, then another, then a third, and they turn of themselves, I giggle and grin and say all the necessary things. As a rule the records last me

for about two hours, just enough to carry me through a lunch or a tea-party. They seem to serve their purpose, because people think highly of my entertainment value. Honestly they do, so you needn't smile. An American woman—and American women are experts in these matters—said the other day to a friend of mine that I am the life and soul of the company here. Can you believe it? But when I've played all my records I'm done for: then I simply dry up and have to invent something to get away: a headache or some shopping. . . . You see, I must have these records on account of Cecil and his position. You are a free lance, so you can cut out all these parlour tricks, but we can't, not in Mexico, which is really a provincial town where everybody knows and sees everybody else."

"Nor can I afford it, not really," I said. "In London social contacts are just as important as here for getting work. That's why I get none. I'm not made for social contacts of that superficial kind, and you are."

"You're wrong there; I'm not made that way either. I had to train myself for a long time. At first, when we came to the States after the years of exile in Finland, I had no idea how to play the game, I used to sit and wonder: How can they talk such a lot about nothing at all? I was silent for a year, and then I decided I must learn to do it. And I did learn. It was very hard work, but I persevered, and when I got my gramophone records it became easy. . . . Is that wrong of me?"

"No."

"Why not? It's so mechanical."

"Yes, but then you know it's mechanical necessity, and so long as you know that it won't affect your mind. Just as shaving doesn't affect mine. The harm only begins when people discover that mechanical chatting is im-

portant and go at it wholeheartedly. . . . I think I'll follow your example and get some gramophone records for myself when I'm back in London."

"Don't," she said seriously. "It won't come off. But you might try and become more tolerant."

"Why, pray?"

"Because. . . . Oh, I don't know how to put it, but intolerance is a little . . . narrow-minded. Now, isn't it?"

The intonation of her voice had changed; she was now appealing not to that intellectual self of mine which had been speaking so far, but to the whole of me. And before my intellect had time to check it, that whole of me blurted out:

"You're right, it is narrow-minded."

Six o'clock. The sun had just set, and something extraordinary was happening to the sky. The blue was rapidly fading from it, driven out by a dead silvery white, which rose from under the horizon on all sides, as though the sinking sun had set the other hemisphere on fire. The sight was beautiful and uncanny at the same time. Standing out with amazing clearness against the glow of the white conflagration, the ridge surrounding the valley seemed to have moved quite close. For a minute the snow caps of the two volcanoes grew pink, then, imperceptibly, the pink changed into the familiar cold blue of the evening snow.

Mary had come back home and with a quiet concentration was taking off her roller-skates.

"You know, Mother, Chérie has a swollen knee and can't skate," she informed us over her shoulder.

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Lydia, and, turning to

me: "Chérie has always some trouble or other. Either she gets measles when nobody has them, or a dog bites her, or something. A month ago she managed to stab herself in the throat with a pair of scissors, so now we call her *Chérie à la gorge percée*."

"She wanted to go to bed because of her knee," continued Mary, "but I told her not to be stupid, because it's only a bump, so she didn't."

Having taken off the skates, she rose and went towards the hall. On the way she came up to her mother and hugged her with calm deliberation.

"Can I come here and play?" she asked.

"Certainly."

"Then I'll go and fetch my toys."

She freed herself from Lydia's embrace and strolled out, sturdy, serene.

"Would you say she was unhappy?" Lydia asked me.

"No, is she?"

"Yes. She doesn't show it, but I know she is. You see, usually I am a lot with her, and these last days she's hardly seen me, because I've been with you most of the time. But that is good for her. I want her to adjust herself to independence. I regret to say she has a sort of cult of me, and I don't want that; she must learn not to rely on me in everything. That may sound cruel, but I'm thinking of her future. Ada, my second, the charming one, was like that, and the result was that when she had to live in the States by herself she was quite miserable for a long time. The heart-rending letters she used to write to me. . . . No, I want to spare Mary that."

At this juncture Jim and Xenia made their appearance, both flushed and excited, over-excited. The tall room was at once filled with noise.

"You know, Mother, I met a *charro* and he showed me how to lasso . . ."

"Mother, can I go to Phyllis's after supper?"

"Oh Xenia, do shut up! Mother, the *charro*. . ."

"I won't shut up, leave me alone!" cried Xenia on a high hysterical note. "Mother, can I . . .?"

"No, you can't," said Lydia very patiently. "You were up late last night, so you'll stay at home to-night."

"Oh, Mother!" Her mouth was diagonally awry, her forehead corrugated, her legs started twitching.

"No stamping, please," warned Lydia, who knew the symptom, and in an aside to me: "Now you see her normal self. Pretty, isn't it?"

"But Mother, I said I would come . . ."

"You should have asked me before saying that."

Jim, who was swinging an imaginary lasso, interjected viciously: "Your Phyllis is a silly fool."

With a dangerous gleam in her eyes Xenia sharply turned on him. But she had no time to let herself go.

"Out with both of you!" ordered Lydia. "I'm not your nurse, and I'm not going to listen to your silly bickering. Out!"

They left, grumbling under their breath, every limb in their bodies registering protest. Then Mary came along with a large box, the contents of which she spread on the carpet before the fire. It was her museum: a collection of clumsily-made and strangely macabre little toys: pink sugar dogs, with green crosses on their backs; skeletons which jerked their extremities when you pulled the string; chocolate skulls with white crosses growing out of their crowns; two sugar monks carrying an open coffin with a revoltingly pallid marzipan corpse in it.

"The Indios sell these things on the Day of the Dead,"

Lydia explained to me. "It's a great holiday of theirs. In the afternoon they have picnics in the cemeteries, where they sit on the tombs, play the guitar and drink their horrid *pulque* beer: you can smell it the next day. And at night they fire revolvers till dawn. Poor Bang-Ho never gets from under my bed on that day."

"What have the revolvers to do with the dead?"

"I don't know. Perhaps they mean to frighten the devils away. . . . There is also the Day of the Architects, when no building is done, and on that day also they shoot all over the place. Pistolomania it's called. They have some funny customs. In the country we saw the funeral of a child one day: a jazz band in front—the saxophone and the rest of it—playing the latest American tune; then a table with the corpse smothered in flowers; then the father of the child with a bandana kerchief tied across his eyes—I suppose to show how grief-stricken he was—and everybody frightfully serious. . . ."

Then she remembered that Antonia had to speak to her and went to the kitchen. Mary followed her with her eyes, made some mental calculation, jumped up, and ran after her.

Cecil arrived, tired but in high spirits. He kissed Lydia on the forehead, threw Mary up in the air, and settled on the sofa.

"I saw a funny thing this morning," he said to Lydia. "You know that house they're building at the corner of our Sevilla? As I was passing it in the morning I noticed something queer: they were really working. . . . You won't appreciate that," he said, turning to me, "because you don't know how the Mexicans work as a rule. It

makes one sick to look at them; half of them just stand about staring into space and the other half move like December flies. But this morning they were hopping like fleas. I thought it fishy, so I stopped the car and spoke to the foreman. I called him señor—they like that—gave him a cigar and asked him what had gone wrong. At first he wouldn't tell me, but I gave him another cigar and that untied his tongue. The owner, it appeared, had promised a good bonus if the house were finished before February. That's against the rules, for their Union doesn't allow any bonuses; but, said the fellow with a sly wink, the Union needn't know, need they? . . . You know, I suppose, that Mexico is a Socialist country?"

"I know that much. Who are the real rulers, by the way?"

"The workmen. And the lawyers to some extent. The workmen are very well organised and terribly strong; what they say goes. When we in our mine want to do something we must first secure the consent of the workmen. So a conference is called, which means endless palaver. We spent literally days over some trifling point which in the States would be settled in five or ten minutes. To-day, for instance, we spent six hours discussing the shifts of the van-drivers, which is simply a question of scheduling, no working hours and no wages involved. And they always insist on my being present; I suppose it makes them feel important. So I had no lunch to-day; we talked from ten till four. . . . Well, and you two, what have you been doing?"

"Sitting here. Walking in the park," said Lydia.

"Why didn't you take him somewhere? To the Museum for instance?"

"He hates museums."

"To the *toros* then." He meant bullfight.

"He would hate that too."

"How do you know?"

"Because I know him."

"Does she?" he asked me.

"Yes."

"Mmm," he grunted. "At least you might have lunched him at the Reforma. It's our best restaurant."

"And therefore," I said, "indistinguishable from any other best restaurant in any country."

Lydia nodded acquiescence. Cecil scrutinised me humorously.

"You're a writer, aren't you?" he asked.

"More or less."

"Well then, you ought to see everything in Mexico once you are here."

"No, not everything. Only what I can assimilate."

"And what is that?"

"The sun, the sky, the hills. Your family. Certainly not the best restaurants."

He shook his head.

"You're a queer cuss," he muttered.

Then he jumped up from the sofa and went into the other room to tamper with the radio. We were treated to a succession of crashing and whistling and coughing and booming, the twang of the Mexican guitars, some fast Spanish and nasal American. "That won't last long, he'll soon be fed up with it," said Lydia comfortingly, and indeed a few minutes later the radio choked, emitted a death-rattle, and fell silent. Cecil came back to us.

"Damn the beastly thing!" he grumbled. "Nothing but jazz and politics. . . . Won't you have a sherry?"

"No, thank you," I said.

"Oh yes, you must. Just to prove that you aren't a blasted teetotaller."

I looked at his clever bulldog face and thought that had I been a woman I too would have fallen in love with him. A man of clear design, organised on simple straightforward lines, without any mysteries or complications, one who knew not only what he wanted, but also what you wanted, one on whom you could rely both in a crisis and in the humdrum of everyday life—an ideal husband, as Lydia had said.

Lydia, I noticed, was watching me covertly with a question in her eyes. Profiting by a moment when Cecil turned away to prod Mary in the ribs, I nodded affirmatively to Lydia. She nodded back with a pleased smile: I had read her question aright.

Dinner was over. Xenia, still pouting and looking plain, went up to her room, while Jim settled in the study, where he proceeded to worry the wireless. "Shut the door for heaven's sake!" Lydia shouted, and I made Cecil talk about bandits.

"There are still some left, but not many," he said. "Last year in Chihuahua they kidnapped Lammer, the American engineer of the Concepcion mine—half the mines here are called Concepcion. Well, after having got him they phoned from the mine direct to Gallero, the Home Secretary, demanding two thousand pounds ransom. Gallero rang up old Rogers, the chairman of the concern which runs the Concepcion, and Rogers said: 'Offer them fifty pounds.' Gallero thought it was far too little. 'That's just why,' said old Rogers. 'They'll haggle, and you can send soldiers in the meantime.' But this Gallero was a fussy fellow; he was afraid the bandits might kill Lammer, so he decided he would offer them

five hundred. He tried to get them on the phone, but couldn't get through to the mine, so after all he sent a lorry with soldiers. And an hour later the bandits rang him up again and said they were prepared to accept four hundred. He saw then that old Rogers was right, and he offered them fifty. They haggled for a long time and came to no agreement, so negotiations were broken off. Then the bandits started quarrelling with each other, because some of them thought fifty would be good enough, and while they were quarrelling the soldiers arrived. The bandits took Lammer and fled to the hills; the soldiers pursued them. There was a tremendous battle in the hills, which lasted the whole afternoon. Lammer was killed right at the beginning: he dropped off a boulder and lay on the ground, while they went on shooting over his head; but otherwise no one was hurt. Finally, the bandits took to their heels, and then Lammer got up and said 'Thank you' to the soldiers: he had only pretended to be dead.

"In another mine—I forget its name—the bandits kidnapped the watchman, who was a Mexican. They demanded quite a small sum, something like a hundred pounds; the company decided to pay it, and they released the chap. He came back to the mine and started drinking on a terrific scale, standing drinks to everybody. He couldn't hold his tongue, and so it came out in the end that he himself had planned the raid with the bandits, who had paid him one-third commission on his ransom. That's what we call here *cosas Mexicanas*."

"Have you yourself ever come across any bandits?" I asked.

"No. But I was in the hold-up of a train once, some ten years ago. We were passing through a narrow ravine, when suddenly the train stopped and shooting began.

We had a dozen soldiers with us and a smart officer, who looked exactly like a monkey, and in the end the bandits were beaten off. When the fighting was over we stepped out of the carriage, and there was a dead bandit lying in the ditch: he had been shot down from the rock above. We had a young Mexican girl in our carriage, one of those sugar-sweet creatures with a baby's cheeks and holy innocence in her eyes. She went up to the corpse and tried to push it over with her toe, but as it wouldn't turn she looked at us and said, beaming all over: 'Oh, how heavy he is!' It's curious, their attitude to death. . . ."

"Tell him about the shooting at the Prado hotel," suggested Lydia.

"But that has nothing to do with the bandits."

"Tell him all the same. It's also one of the *cosas Mexicanas*."

"Well, it was like this. Our house was being decorated, so I sent Lydia and the children to Cuernavaca and moved to the hotel. One night as I was changing for supper shooting broke out on the ground floor. I thought it was a revolution, because just then some general or other had rebelled—they are always rebelling—but as a matter of fact it was a Mexican captain quarrelling with his wife. At first they had been shooting at each other; then a gallant American from Texas produced a revolver and opened fire on the captain, whereupon the woman joined forces with her husband and they both peppered away at the Texas man. They must have fired at least forty shots, and when I came down the whole place was a shambles: smashed glass, holes in the walls, split panels, torn curtains. No one was hurt, of course, except a van horse in the street. The van happened to belong to the Carting Company, which is a subsidiary company of ours, and at first we thought

of suing the captain for damages. But our lawyer advised us not to; he said no judge would find against a husband who defended the honour of his wife."

He told us some more stories about the bandits, and then proposed we should go to Retiro, a well-known cabaret. I asked whether that was absolutely necessary.

"No, it isn't," he said. "But what else can we do?"

"Why do anything?" I retorted. "Let's be content with being. The main trouble of our civilisation is that we do too much and are too little."

I hoped he would rise to that, but he did not: he gave me a quizzical look and jumped up. He could not stand inactivity for long.

"I know what, we'll raid the pantry," he announced, and, taking Lydia and me by the arms he dragged us to the kitchen, humming in an unmusical bass, but with a faultless accent: "*Allons, enfants de la patrie.*"

Antonia's strawberry *mousse* was exquisite, and I had a nightmare that night.

The breakfast-table: coffee, toast, grapefruit, a gigantic pineapple, strawberries, sliced papaya. The electric heater is on, for it was freezing last night. In the courtyard the parrot is croaking time after time: Maaah-ry, Maaah-ry! A monotonous lachrymose *recitativo* is heard in the kitchen: Antonia telling some story to the maid.

Cecil and I are reading newspapers. Mine says:

If you have any doubt about the greatness of our illustrious Señor Presidente listen to these penetrating and wise sayings of his:

1. It is better to die for a good cause than live serving a bad one.
2. To be a great nation we must have justice.
3. The ideals that inspire us are Unity at home and Brotherly relations with the universe.

Unity, Good, Justice, Brotherhood—it strikes me that I have heard it all before, from the mouths of British politicians and Russian Bolsheviki, Italian Fascists and German Nazis. Great words those, as wide as the ocean and more elastic than rubber. You can apply them to anything and in any circumstances, you can use them in the name of peace and in the name of war; to support capitalism and Socialism; to call a strike and break it; to defend the church and spread irreligion; to brand a man and extol him. Whatever it be you wish people to believe, you have only to repeat these magic words five, ten or twenty thousand times, in varying combinations; and if your voice carries far enough, if your smile is prepossessing and your mind narrow enough to overlook the utter senselessness of that repetition, people will end by believing there is some reality behind your words and acclaiming you as a Great Man or, with luck, the Saviour of the Country.

“Do Mexicans often shoot their saviours—I mean their presidents?” I ask.

“Not now,” says Cecil. “The last four or five weren’t shot.”

“Why not?”

“People are getting more civilised with time.”

“What sort of a man is Cardenas? They say he is a remarkable man.”

“Perhaps he is, who can tell? He works a lot, rushing about the country in cars, on mules and on foot, shaking

hands with the Indios and talking, of course; sometimes the government can't find him for days on end. Yes, they say he is honest, but those around him steal; you can't do anything whatsoever without bribing half a dozen people, and red tape is as bad as it was before. Worse perhaps, because he seems to be keener on all sorts of reforms than his predecessors were."

He puts his paper down and knocks out his pipe.

"Well, I have to go now. Want anything in town? Shall I change your American money for you?"

He is a big boss, with eleven hundred men under him; he works like a nigger, yet he finds time to do shopping for other people, make enquiries for them and give them lifts to any place they like. This Doing on a small scale is apparently a pleasure to him and a relaxation from his serious work.

"No, thank you, I can do it myself," I say, and he leaves—but not until he has wormed out of me what wine I like best.

I go on reading my paper:

STRIKE OF ELECTRICIANS

This is stale: we in Europe know all about strikes.

ANOTHER EARTHQUAKE AT PINOTEPA, OAXACA

Let it quake.

DISAPPEARANCE OF BOOKS

The National Revolutionary Bloc of the Chamber of Senators has appointed a commission to investigate the chronic disappearance of books from the Biblioteca

del Congreso, which has by now achieved the dimensions of a national scandal. . . .

Who on earth could have conceived the idea of stealing Congreso books? And what for?

AUTOWIDOW RAVETA CONFESSES

Autowidow (*autoviuda*) is the generic term for women who have killed their husbands. What a superb word! It ought to be introduced in Europe. But the article is impossibly long, it covers almost the whole page.

THE RIGHT TO STRIKE

(A leading article)

I love my country with all the creative strength of my spirit. I shall speak the truth without resorting to base subterfuges or servile platitudes such as are used by my opponents. I hate sectarians and abhor cynicism as fiercely as Emile Zola hated stupidity. I have no belief in oracles nor do I bow before idols. Unlike those obscure persons who, sheltering under assumed names, fling their poisoned arrows at me, I worship Freedom and Democracy. . . ."

Juicy and full of *couleur locale*, no doubt. But two whole columns—heavens!

THE LATEST PLANS OF MARLENE DIETRICH

The incomparable Marlene contemplates a visit to Europe. When asked: Do you like travelling? she answered with a radiant smile; "I do. Travelling is the best means of widening one's mental horizon. . . ."

On her last trip to South America the brilliant actress had twenty-nine trunks with her. . . .

Quite. The more trunks the wider the horizon. There is a rich female in Buenos Aires who drives about the town in three Rolls-Royces: one for herself, one for her purchases, and one for her friends in case she meets more of them than can be accommodated in her car.

I turn over the serious pages of the paper and glance at the advertisements:

ROOMS TO LET

Discreet. Newly furnished. Absolutely serious, private bath, all conveniences. Revillagigedo 999.

Discreet. Elegant, absolute safety. 2 pesos. Merida 888.

Very Discreet and most elegant. 1 peso 50. Dinamarca 777.

Yes, that is Mexico: absolutely serious and very discreet. . . . I put down the paper. What a blessing the Press is! How could mankind ever live without it? Omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, it has all the attributes of Deity. Through it the man of righteous ways obtains his deserts and the ignorant is enlightened; it strengthens the arm of truth and reveals the iniquity of the evildoer; it encourages the faltering autowidow and provides shelter for homeless love. . . .

My thoughts were just gathering eloquence when Lydia came in and I had to have a second breakfast to keep her company.

"Well, let's go to the veranda," said Lydia, when we

had finished breakfast and got up. Suddenly she put her finger to her mouth and nodded in the direction of the hall, where Antonia was giving orders to the grocer on the telephone. "You must hear that," whispered Lydia. "Hush."

On tiptoe we approached the door and eavesdropped. Antonia was speaking in an even, high-pitched melancholy voice, as though she were telling a tale of woe.

"No, no salad to-day, we don't want any. The Señor lunches in town because he's playing golf later on, but the Señora and the Señor from England will be at home, so *por favor* send us some cucumbers. And some *papas* for the children, only not so old as last time. No tangerines: Señorita Kasenna says she's fed up with tangerines, and we had to throw away a lot because they started rotting. And a dozen eggs. No, you'd better send two dozen: the boy has taken to eating them. He had two yesterday and asked for a third, but the Señora said No, two was quite enough. And see to it that they are fresh and big, not like the last lot. 'The eggs are getting small,' the Señora said to me the other day. 'Why is that, Antonia?' and I said to the Señora: 'I can't think, Señora, what's happened to them, but they were bigger before. Perhaps,' I said, 'they came from another *hacienda*' So please see to it, otherwise the Señora will buy eggs somewhere else. Adios, Señor Martinez, adios."—I can see her head nodding eagerly—"I must rush to the kitchen now, I have a lot to do, adios, adios."

The receiver is replaced and Antonia's plump, cylindrical form floats past us towards the kitchen. Her face has a lachrymose expression; it is long, with deep grooves running down from the eyes to the corners of the mouth, grooves that must have been cut by torrents of tears. As

a matter of fact she does enjoy a good cry and cries at the slightest provocation: when the pudding is slow in rising, or when she has smashed a plate. She is a good Christian: every Sunday she goes to Mass and returns with swollen eyelids; if you ask her for a piece of toast she'll bring you five; and she possesses an unlimited capacity for worrying over other people's stomachs. Will *la chiquita* (Mary) like the pudding? Kasenna looks pale to-day—why is she pale? And the Señor didn't have a second helping of cutlets—has he got indigestion?

She is highly strung, and the thought of visitors throws her into a panic. She gets quite stupid then, she just stands by the stove, emitting heavy sighs and letting everything burn. So when people are expected to dinner Lydia breaks the news to her gradually. At breakfast Lydia remarks in a casual manner: "There will be one or two Señores to dinner, some old friends of ours." Then at lunch-time she says: "I think four of them will be coming." And only at tea-time does she divulge the full number of visitors.

"She has a passion for giving presents to the children," says Lydia. "She must spend half her wages on them. I remonstrated with her—because it's rather awkward—and she said she wouldn't do it, but a few days later I saw Mary playing with a new doll. I asked who gave it to her, and she said she couldn't tell me, she had promised not to, so I knew it was from Antonia. . . . Oh, and her birthday present to Cecil! That was marvellous! In the morning, when I was still in bed and he had gone to take his bath, the door opened, and in came Antonia with a live turkey under one arm and that vase which you see there under the other—it's a ghastly thing, but it must have cost a pound at least. 'This is for the Señor, he-he-hee,' she said, giggling coyly. 'May I leave it here,

Señora?' Her idea was to put the vase and the turkey under the bed: she meant to spring a surprise on the Señor.

"And you should hear her when she's about to kill a chicken. She talks to it as she sharpens the knife, talks comfortingly, because she's kind-hearted. 'Don't worry, *pobrecito*, you won't suffer. *Un momentito*, and it'll all be over. That happened to your parents and your grandparents. It's fate. . . .'"

"Is she a typical Mexican servant?" I asked,

"Only typical of the old school of servants. The modern ones are different. Our last maid, for instance, stole twenty pounds' worth of things in the first week. I called in the police, who investigated the matter and found that it was an inside job, but there wasn't enough evidence to proceed against her, so I dismissed her: I had her on trial, on a week's notice. A little later I was summoned to the Junta—the Labour Court—and they ordered me to pay her three months' wages at fifty pesos a month. That was what she said her wages were, although, as a matter of fact, they were only thirty pesos. But, of course, her word was better than mine; the Judge wouldn't even listen to me."

She told me some more stories illustrating the pressure which Mexican democracy brings to bear upon the employer.

"A couple of years ago I had a washerwoman. She started drinking and ruined the stuff I had sent her, so I gave my washing to someone else. She sued me for £200—loss of work and rheumatism. For some queer reason the Junta dismissed her claim and I forgot all about it. Then one morning at ten o'clock I was handed a green form, a summons from the Junta, saying that if I didn't pay seventy pounds by noon that same day, our

house would be seized and sold by auction. Well, it's no use arguing with them; I had to pay. It was ten to twelve when I brought the money to the Junta."

"But you said the Junta had dismissed the claim."

"Yes. I suppose they changed their minds . . ."

At Cecil's Golf Club a caddie who had worked for an American for five years conceived the brilliant idea of claiming 6,000 hours' overtime, which at two pesos an hour amounted to some seven hundred pounds. The Junta found in his favour.

One morning Lydia took me to see the national game of bull-throwing. A bull rushes out of the enclosure simultaneously with a magnificently dressed *charro* on horse-back. The *charro* gallops close to the bull, catches him by the tail, flings his leg over the tail and makes the horse swerve aside. Thus a force perpendicular to the bull's course is brought to bear on his rear; his hind legs skid, and, if the *charro's* hand is strong enough to hold the tail, the bull crashes to the ground. Music, wild applause, yells, flourishes of hats; then a pause, and another bull is let out, another *charro* tries his luck. It is an excellent sport, highly spectacular (for the *charros* are fanatics of their art—they will spend their last peso on a new sombrero or a saddle) and not cruel; the bull seems to enjoy it as much as his adversary does. On that particular occasion the champion thrower was an American, a lecturer in archæology at the University of Oklahoma.

In the afternoon we were in the park again and talked about Russia, the Russians we knew, and what had become of them. To my knowledge, of the seventeen Old Boys of my form who had stayed in Russia only two were

alive; the rest had died or been killed, including Volgin, who had worked with Chicherin and Litvinov for fifteen years; he had "vanished" a year ago. (He had never doubted that this would happen to him sooner or later, simply because he was a non-proletarian.) From my sister in Leningrad I had had no news for many years; I hoped she was dead. Lydia's brother had been killed in the Civil War; two cousins of hers had been shot by the Bolsheviks.

It was the most unexpected people who had managed to survive all the recurrent waves of terror. Countess T., my aunt by adoption as I used to call her, a *grande dame* from head to foot, held a very influential position in Moscow, where she was Professor of Deportment at the Central G.P.U. Office and taught Stalin's acolytes how to use knife and fork, and how to bow to ladies and speak to them. Her daughter, the mystically-minded Princess A., had developed healing power and was working in a clinic, curing people by laying hands on them—unofficially, since Marxism does not recognise such nonsense as magnetic force. A relative of Lydia's, a decadent poet, frail as a lily of the valley, had turned into a scientist and was doing valuable research work in the Arctic.

Most of the exiled Russians we knew were leading a dreary existence working as chauffeurs, clerks, etc. Most but not all. Petrov, an engineer, had for a while been earning his living as a picador in Spain. (He once, with the help of a chair and a mackintosh, demonstrated the tricks of his trade to Nadya and me.) Tiring of bulls he went to Bolivia, where they made him manager of a lead mine. But somehow he got involved in a revolution; he fled the country, went to Switzerland, and opened a factory of dolls' eyes. I understand he is a rich man now.

Half-way between South America and Polynesia a

nameless rock sticks out of the Pacific. On that rock there is a seismographic station, a wireless, a little kitchen garden—and a Russian, an ex-attorney. He gets food and letters twice a year.

Some time ago a Cossack, an officer of the famous Savage Division, had got to Vera Cruz. He settled there and married a Mexican girl. When in his cups he beat her, which she did not mind; but when he started making eyes at an American woman, she put five bullets into his body (one miss only). She was tried, sentenced to two years in prison, and let out after a fortnight. For the Mexicans are an incorrigibly romantic people, with a deep respect for passion and jealousy.

There was another Russian in Mexico, an ex-naval officer and balalaika-player. He had had an affair with a married Mexican woman, then, growing tired of her, had settled with a French dancer. One day a registered parcel arrived for him; when he started undoing the string the parcel exploded and he lost his eyesight. He is stone blind now; the French dancer has stuck to him and keeps him to this day.

"Then, of course, there is Señor Trotsky," said Lydia. "He lives not far from us, in the house of Diego Rivera, the painter, with two policemen watching him or guarding him, one doesn't know which. You wouldn't like to see him, would you?"

"Heavens, no! There is only one class of people who are duller than book-keepers, and it's politicians."

"Yes, politics are boring. That's why I should like to live in England. It's the best country to live in." She gave a little sigh. "The least political one."

"Quite so. One can live for years without noticing whether the Government is Conservative, Socialist or what."

"Tolerance."

"More than that: consideration for the other fellow. True, it's only negative consideration; let's all try and not annoy each other. But even that is a lot more than you get in other countries; in fact, the maximum of what can be expected of a nation. . . . If only they could cast all that Puritan humbug out of their system."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning the intellectual bogey of Sin which produces sham religion; the sexual inhibition which lowers their vitality; the emotional inhibition which makes Englishmen—not so much women—behave like children in a psychological crisis; and the over-development of formal convention which makes large chunks of English life—and *par ricochet* of literature—inane and anæmic. Much of that has gone since the war—we have seen it going year by year—but there is still a lot left."

Then she asked me how I lived in London. My letters, she said, dealt with everything under the sun except my everyday life.

"I didn't think it could interest you," I said, "because it's a very ordinary life. In the morning I stay late in bed ruminating over the chapter I'm working at: this is the best time for getting new ideas. Then I get up, potter about the house, and sit down to write. At the beginning, when Drafts One and Two are on stocks, I work little and have time to see my friends, half a dozen people of whom I am fond and whom I value. From Draft Three onwards, when the work becomes more mechanical, I am at it the whole day, and then I see fewer people. All my books have the same—biological—period of gestation: exactly nine months. Only once was there a delayed birth, and that was when I wrote about my misshapen affair with Miriam.

"The style of our living is genteel poverty with a thin sprinkling of luxury. Nadya is an over-conscientious charwoman the first half of the day and a lady the second. She has Russian and English friends. As a rule, her Russians are impecunious and unhappy, and she helps them. It is surprising how much you can do for other people if you have no money but plenty of pertinacity. In turn the English help her, take her out and ask her to stay with them. I have my share of the housework: I wash the plates, empty the slop-pail, prepare the firewood. When I go to Vincent's he gives me champagne. Sometimes I meet the Great Ones—they are singularly uninteresting and always swollen-headed; and once or twice a year I am taken to the Ritz or some other equally distinguished place. I like going there, because it reminds me how little one can get for money, even a lot of money."

"Hear, hear! It's pathetic, that inability of the rich to amuse themselves. They always do the same two or three things: expensive restaurants and drinking, night clubs and drinking, rushing about in cars and drinking. They seem to have no imagination at all. Why is that?"

"Must be the effect of money. It levels down people's mentality even more than poverty does. . . . But I wonder whether we should do any better on a million pounds."

"I certainly should. Because I should think not of my own pleasure but of other people's. One gets much more that way, doesn't one? For oneself, I mean."

"No doubt. The Wider Egoism, I call it."

Then I made her talk about herself, beginning with her life in Russia during the Revolution.

"There isn't much to tell," she said. "We did the usual things. Ivan"—she meant her first husband—"worked in his laboratory the whole day. I looked after

the children and the flat, stood in queues, and stole wood. Once I was nearly caught by a patrol, and I shall never forget those moments of panicky fear, a fear which blotted out the whole world. I carted logs and kerosene in a little sleigh which Ivan had made. We ate horse-flesh, which isn't so bad when you get used to it.

"One day Father asked us to a gala supper which consisted of two herrings and some pastry made of potato-peel and cooked in some by-product of naphtha. I couldn't touch it, but the others ate and liked it. Once we got three pounds of caviare—our maid had stolen it from a drunken sailor; we ate it all in one day and nearly died. Somehow none of us was arrested or put in prison: sheer luck, of course. When there was no more food left in Petrograd I used to go by train to the country and barter things to the peasants for food. Once, when I was coming back with a bag of potatoes, it was snatched from me by two soldiers just as I was turning into our street. With time the villages nearest to Petrograd were depleted of food, and one had to go farther and farther to get any. On one occasion I travelled fourteen hours, lying on the third floor—that is to say, not on the upper berth, but above that, on the rack. One could only lie sideways there, which was very uncomfortable, particularly since I was expecting Jim then: I was in the sixth month. From the station I walked nine or ten miles to a village. I had taken our *portières* from Father's house—perhaps you remember them, they hung in the drawing-room. Good stuff it was, with three layers: silk, flannel and cloth. I exchanged them in the village for twelve pounds of flour and eight pounds of potatoes; then I walked back the ten miles to the station. The train was absolutely packed, but a soldier pulled me in through the window. When I think of it now I simply can't

believe that I did all this. But one can stand a lot when one has to. . . . You remember Baroness Taube, the plump girl whom you met at our house and whom you hated? She had a grandmother who was seventy-five and had spent most of her life in bed with all sorts of ailments. In 1918 the old lady escaped to Finland in a little rowing-boat. There was a storm; the boat was nearly swamped, and for several hours she sat up to her hips in water. That was in November, mind you; yet she didn't catch so much as a cold.

"You know how we escaped, you've described it in one of your novels. But it isn't a good description, because you left out the worst of it, which was the waiting. First, waiting for the money which Father was trying to raise so as to pay the Finnish smugglers for taking us across the bay. Then waiting for a sign from them. They gave us the sign at last; we moved to a village near the coast, and there we waited again, sitting in a dark, unheated hut with no light and only some stale bread to chew. Four days we waited, four times the boat was ready for us, but something always went wrong. After that the crossing itself was almost a picnic: even when the search-lights of the fortress were sweeping over us I didn't feel frightened or excited. Somehow they didn't notice us, and we got to Finland all right. I had a brooch on me when we started, a very expensive one, and I lost it. And fancy! the next morning one of the smugglers brought it back to me: I had dropped it in the boat. He wouldn't even accept a reward; he said he had been paid for the job and that was enough. They are marvellous, those Finns!

"You know about our life in Finland, which was just the ordinary life of refugees, quite unexciting. Then Ivan got a job in the States and we went there. Now at

Southampton, the day after I had seen you in Hull, I went through the worst experience in my life. It was at the passport office on the quay. My passport was in order and so were the visas, but then one of the officials asked me for the guarantee of maintenance—meaning the certificate which Ivan had to get from the American authorities to the effect that he was able to keep me and the children. He had got it all right and had sent it to me, but for some reason it had never reached me and I had no idea that such a guarantee was necessary. Then the official—the rudest man I've ever come across in England—turned to the porter. 'Take these cases back, she isn't going,' he said, and flung the passport back at me. That meant the loss of the tickets; Ivan, I knew, had got up to his ears in debt to pay for them, and all I had with me was about two pounds. Oh, it was horrible!" she shuddered.

"I spoke to that official. At first he wouldn't listen to me, and told me not to waste his time. And then suddenly all my fear was gone, and I felt quite calm. I knew I must make him pass me, and I knew I should do it. And I did it. Don't ask me how, because later on I couldn't remember one word of what I had said; all I know is that I spoke . . . oh well, like a lady. In the end he looked down, fumbled with his pencil and then shouted to the porter: 'All right, take her in.' That I count as the biggest thing I've done in my life."

"Personality," I muttered.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. Go on."

"So we arrived in New York. Thirty dollars a week, a family of seven, no maid and no charwoman—we lived like that for half a year. I know you envy me—on Nadya's behalf—because I have an easy life now. But those

months were probably worse than anything your Nadya has experienced. It was a nightmare. We lived in a slum district, and in all those six months I only went once, for an hour, to the decent part of New York.

"Then Ivan got a much better job in the South and we moved there. But just when life became easier from the point of view of money, my other trouble began."

She was alluding to her parting with Ivan and marriage with Cecil. The conflict she went through before making up her mind nearly broke her: in the end she, a tall woman, weighed only six stone, and the doctors gave her up.

"And that is all and I'm not going to talk about myself any more," she ended. "Now *you* must tell *me* something. I know what: tell me about that philosophy of yours—or is it Yoga?—which you expound in your autobiography. I must say I didn't quite get it. Is it because I'm silly, or do other people also find it difficult to understand?"

"They do, although it's frightfully simple. . . . But if you don't mind, we'll talk about it some other time. To-day I want to ask you what you think of the Miriam episode."

"Nothing," said Lydia promptly. "What is there to think? You were caught."

"You mean caught by my own nature?"

"Yes. You couldn't help being you."

"So you don't blame me?"

"No. You know I don't."

"But why not? I have done everything that is called bad and wrong. I deceived my wife—at least in intent; I dealt her a cruel blow, I almost ruined our married life—and all for nothing, really."

"You couldn't help it. I should blame you if you had been rude to her. . . ."

"I sometimes am."

"I know and that is wrong, because you can and must control your temper. But one can't control love."

"Most people would say that my feeling for Miriam wasn't love."

"Maybe it wasn't, but it was as bad as love. Anyhow, you couldn't control it."

"Still, people blame me."

"I know. Most of my friends who have read your book do. They say you are an egoist and have no sense of duty and no consideration for your wife. I always feel it isn't to the point, but I don't know how to argue with them. How should I answer them?"

"But you know the answer—you gave it yourself half a minute ago."

"When I said love couldn't be controlled?"

"Exactly. Black love or white love, you can't suppress it except at the very beginning. You can sometimes—that depends on circumstances—deliberately bar the way to its physical satisfaction; in that case, you will not elope and you'll remain technically faithful, but your mental tension will be raised to a white-hot obsession which will do more harm to you and the people round you than the straightforward pursuit of your desire. I'm speaking, of course, of a genuine and strong feeling, one which sets the whole man on fire, and not of flitting infatuations, *béguins*: these can and should be controlled. The difference between the two is a difference of degree, not of quality. I mean, the so-called love is not something as different from a light infatuation as gold is from lead. No, the component forces are the same in both, only their

combination and strength vary. . . . Do you agree with that?"

"Yes."

"Most women don't. Not even intelligent women. They stick to the old romantic conception of love as something almost metaphysical, on a plane of its own, above sexual, emotional and intellectual sympathy. Hence the fiction of the sanctity of love and holy marriage vows. The husband may be so absorbed in golf or insurance or philosophy that he doesn't notice his wife; yet, so long as he pays no attention to other women, he is considered faithful to her, and his feeling for her is love, real and holy. But once he has an affair, then love is smashed and sullied and desecrated, even if his affair was a short one, even if it hasn't weakened his affection for his wife. Which is nonsense, of course. For the point that matters—or rather ought to matter—in marriage is what the husband gives to his wife. If he gives her little—whether because of another lady in the background or because of golf—the marriage is a poor one anyhow, whether he goes off with somebody for a week-end or not. I know, for instance, that the years of gloom and overwork in Newcastle have done much more harm to my relationship with Nadya than any affair could have done. We still feel their effect, they've left a permanent residue of irritability in us."

"But you don't defend promiscuity, do you?"

"No, for it cheapens one's relationships. But let's make clear what the word means. Don Juan, who is said to have had one thousand and three mistresses, was not promiscuous, because he gave himself wholeheartedly to all of them; and a woman who just out of curiosity takes a lover for a week is. Half-heartedness is the hallmark of promiscuity. From this point of view

one can be promiscuous in holy wedlock with one's own wife. Many people are, you know."

"Then what is love?"

"A vague term which everyone interprets as he likes. Its formula is an infinite one: A plus B plus C plus D plus E, and so on. Wherein A stands for physical attraction, B for æsthetic appreciation, C for emotional sympathy, D for common tastes, E for vanity, and so on. How many of these ingredients and in what proportions go to make 'love' or 'real love'? Personally I hold that the factor A—physical attraction—is the strongest of the lot and therefore a strong passion might be called love, a judgment with which my wife fiercely disagrees. But then she calls love a particular union which is based on pity, and is to my mind a misplaced exercise in Christian virtue. Which of us is right and which is wrong? Love, she says, is proved by lifelong devotion; to which I retort that lifelong devotion is often merely a habit or mental sloth or lack of opportunity. And if we are to judge love by the sacrifices it's capable of, then we'll have to admit that youngsters in the throes of First Passion are the greatest lovers, because they are apt to smash any amount of crockery, including their heads. That's why I think that in serious conversation one should, if possible, avoid the word Love: it's a generalisation with no reality behind it.

"But people are fond of these unreal generalisations: they simplify matters so comfortably. Take the notion of unselfishness, a notion we all use twenty times a day, taking its contents for granted. But what is unselfishness? Suppose my book has sold a hundred thousand copies and I buy Nadya a sable coat. Is that an unselfish action? No, because obviously I shall enjoy her pleasure at wearing the coat. So, wishing to be 'really' unselfish

I go and buy her something which I loathe myself, a pianola, for instance. But even that will be selfish of me, for if I could compel myself to buy the beastly thing, that means that the pleasure I hope to derive from Nadya's enjoyment of it is bigger than the pain it'll cause me. Or take the intelligent careerist who serves his country for his own aggrandisement. On the face of it he is selfish, more selfish than the man whose behaviour is prompted by so-called patriotism. But what if for the sake of applause the careerist makes a sacrifice for which the other, the patriotic fellow, hasn't the guts? Is he still selfish, more so than the patriot? . . . Or take the doctor who takes up a difficult case free of charge. That is unselfish because he renounces so many guineas; and at the same time it is selfish because, firstly, he derives some moral satisfaction from his generosity and, secondly, because he knows that others will praise him for it. And who is there to say which of these two motives plays the larger part in his decision to renounce the guineas? He doesn't know himself—as he will admit if he is honest about himself.

“You wonder why I'm talking like this? Well, I've begun to answer your question about my philosophy, or rather to clear the ground for my answer. Before tackling the question: What shall we do? we must first of all cast off all those arbitrary and unreal generalisations with which people usually operate, such as love, unselfishness, patriotism, good and evil, etc. They are words, mere words; only when we have forgotten them shall we be able to see the psychological facts as they really are and not as we would like them to be.”

Mexico is a dusty town situated in the middle of the usual circular valley and consisting of:

a few imposing buildings in the centre;

a few blocks of big but not imposing business buildings;

an inner belt with respectable middle-class houses;

a wider outer belt, a region of utter squalor, punctuated now and again by the ultra-modern building of a school, a Junta or a cinema.

The buses are invariably overcrowded, with bunches of people on the running-board. To collect the fares the conductor performs a series of acrobatic feats which would make his British colleague faint after ten minutes: with simian agility he dives and wriggles between the passengers, or, failing to penetrate through the living wall, jumps out at the front and, when the back of the bus passes him, leaps on to the four square inches of running-board which are not occupied by people's feet. The passengers are Indio workmen, silent, polite, with an arrested dream in their eyes; Mexican gentlemen who under their civilised suits display the butt of a Browning and a belt stuffed with cartridges; Mexican clerks, as dull-looking as any other clerks; and Mexican beauties, girls with gentle profiles, masses of lustrous black hair, and almond-shaped eyes which at first make you think of inexhaustible passion and tenderness. But only at first; for after a few seconds you realise that they are not eyes at all, but looking-holes: there is no expression and no life in them, none whatever, as in the eyes of a calf or a Hollywood blonde.

Mexican films are as bad as Mexican novels. Mexican songs sound pleasant at first, but their charm soon wears off. The country abounds in excellent tenor voices, all *tenori di grazia*. Diego Rivera, the painter, is the only

man of talent—or perhaps genius—the country has produced.

Quetzacoatl, the famous temple city of the Aztecs, consists of a few pyramids idiotically placed amidst a group of much larger conical hills. The walls of the city, with their rectangular simplicity, are its only impressive part. The exhibits in the Aztec museum are few and poor. Much romantic nonsense has been written about the Aztec civilisation, which, as a matter of fact, was just a Stone Age civilisation with some rudimentary astronomy, any amount of brutality, and general destitution. Montezuma the Magnificent was probably just like one of to-day's Indios, a peaceful, sluggish creature with no brains to speak of and a passion for the filthy *pulque* beer.

With one of Cecil's friends I went up Popocatepetl. The omens augured ill from the very beginning. The hotel at the foot of the mountain where we stayed for the night proved incredibly cold, and after supper a party of tipsy Mexican gentlemen and their prostitutes filled the lounge—the only place where one could sit—with terrific noises. They played on guitars, sang, drank, quarrelled and kissed, all at the same time. That went on till three o'clock; and in the morning we could get no breakfast, for the whole staff was asleep, one waiter lying on the sofa in the lounge, the cook snoring on the kitchen table, two prostitutes with their caballeros reposing on mattresses in the dining-room. Only the manager was up, a foppishly dressed Indio with oily eyes. "Was everything to your satisfaction, Señores?" he asked us gravely. We answered with an impolite No and drove off.

To reach the summit one needs two days and a proper expedition with mules and plenty of warm clothes, on

account of the intense frost at night. We only got as far as the snow-line—that is, about thirteen thousand feet. As scenery goes, the Alps have much more grandeur and variety to offer; but the spaciousness of the view and the deep blue sky are such as cannot be found in Europe.

Mexico in general is not a country for hiking. There are no maps of any kind. Inns—and very bad ones at that—exist only in the towns, which are always a long way off from the mountains; and one must be either a Yogi or a savage to put up with Indian food and Indian huts. The slopes have an easy incline, but are intersected by treacherous ravines over which one wastes a lot of time, as I found out when climbing Ajuzco, one of the mountains nearest to the city. The Indio peasants whom I asked about the path to the top would all begin by saying: “*Derechito, derecho*” (straight on), and would then pour out detailed descriptions of landmarks which I was to encounter: charred trees, boulders, brooks. What they omitted to say was that half a mile farther up the path divided into two, both at a right angle to its former course, and whether you took the one or the other you soon came up against an impassable ravine with vertical walls fifty feet high. Needless to say, I never got to the top.

Derechito, derecho. . . . The Mexicans have a truly Bolshevik genius for muddle and complication.

I enquired at three post offices what stamps one has to put on a post-card to London. The answers were: four, eight, and twenty centavos. The Central Office said ten centavos.

In Chapultepec the Government had erected a huge dam across a ravine and built a house for the superintendent of the dam. When this was done it turned out that there was no water in the ravine. The dam and the

house are still there, and the superintendent keeps goats which eat the leaves of the young trees planted by the Government.

The shallow lakes near the city have been drained. But the soil proved unfit for cultivation on account of its mineral salts. When the wind blows from the east the pulverised salts rise high up in the air and envelop the city in a shroud of grey dust so thick that one cannot see the sun. A ten-million-dollar scheme for refilling the lakes is afoot.

Not far from Lydia's house a country road begins which leads into the desert, no one knows exactly where. For half a mile you walk between barbed wire, fencing off nothing at all. Then the wire ceases; there is a gap wide enough to let a battle-cruiser pass through sideways, and after that gap the wire reappears. A strand of it was lying right across the road in the middle of December; six weeks later it was still there, although there is a certain amount of motor-car traffic on the road.

Lydia's house is Avenida Sevilla 185. To get to it you walk along Prado, and as you walk you notice that the houses are numbered consecutively 155, 165, 185, and 215. At this point Prado ends and Sevilla begins. It begins with Number 185. Hence continuous misunderstandings.

"One morning," said Lydia, "six men came along with a black coffin which they deposited in our court-yard. 'This is for your little girl,' they said to Xenia, who was playing there with the parrot. Now it so happened that Mary was seriously ill just then—she had diphtheria—so Xenia burst into tears and rushed to me howling: 'Motherr, Mary is dead!' I caught the men as they were leaving, and then it appeared that the coffin was for Prado 185, not Sevilla. It was a tiny coffin too, I could

lift it myself; so why they had sent six men with it is a mystery."

Mexicans, irrespective of their social and financial standing, are extremely hospitable, as hospitable as the Scottish crofters or the Russian peasants. When Señor Arvañez heard that I wanted to see a Mexican *hacienda*, he beamed and patted me on the back. "Why, *hombre!*" he cried. "Of course, you must come and stay at my Jalupa. Stay a week, a month, as long as you like—it's an honour to me." I thanked him and went.

Jalupa is situated at an altitude of 10,000 feet on the slope of the ridge which faces the Toluca volcano. Space being superabundant in Mexico, everything on the estate was on an enormous scale: a court-yard the size of Trafalgar Square; the stables a quarter of a mile long; the barns each with the cubic capacity of a big cinema hall. But space was all that remained of the old glory. The huge court-yard was empty but for a mountain of maize straw and a few old carts; the huge stables housed only a dozen horses and cows; a heap of grain in the corner of one of the barns seemed to emphasise its emptiness. One wing of the house was in ruins—it had been burnt down during the Revolution; the private chapel was sealed up by the authorities, and the cross had been wrenched off the roof. The aqueduct that brought water from the hills was smashed, the orchard overgrown with weeds.

Señor Raquita, the bailiff, was a man of fifty-five, a pure Spaniard of noble origin who had not made good in life. Gaunt, erect, long-legged, with a sallow complexion and that tormented face which, heaven knows why, is so

common amongst his compatriots, he personified the *haute école* of Spanish civility. When addressing me, his whole body stiffened with attention, his voice assumed a peculiar solemnity, his words came in a slow, measured sequence, even if he was telling me how to work the obstreperous plug in the w.c. I tried to catch him at saying Si or No, but failed: it was always Si, Señor, and No, Señor. This pomposity was silly, but the deep conviction behind it saved it from being ridiculous.

Señor Raquita would spend half the day riding about the shrunken estate, not so much to supervise the work—for there was hardly any done—as to fulfil a ritual symbolical of his duties. He looked magnificent on horseback: a true caballero in the old grand style. On my first day I rode with him and questioned him about the land and the Revolution.

“Si, Señor, we have only got three hundred acres left, three thousand and seven hundred acres have been taken away from us and given to the Indios. All those fields there, as far as the bushes. As you can see, half that area is overgrown with weeds: the Indios don’t cultivate it. Why? There are many reasons: they have no cattle and no implements, and they are lazy. Very lazy, Señor. When they’ve got enough not to starve they stop working and sleep or drink *pulque*. No, Señor, *pulque* doesn’t make them quarrelsome, they just chat and stagger about till they collapse. It’s only political propaganda which rouses them; then they become like beasts of prey. During the Revolution they used to shoot the cows and the horses of the landowners or put their eyes out. . . . You see that *hacienda* there? Before the Revolution it was very rich, it had a fine orchard with four thousand fruit-trees. The orchard was given to the Indios, who at once cut down all the trees for firewood. They couldn’t even be

bothered to uproot the stumps, so that now the whole of that area is waste land.

"No, Señor, they haven't gained through Socialism. The workmen in towns have, but not the peasants. They've lost. They earned more from the landowner—because he made them work—than they do now when the land is theirs. Also they have to pay more for everything that comes from the town. Then the elections. Every time there is an election—and we have many—our Indios have to walk to Toluca, and that is thirty-five miles. They walk one day, the next day they vote and drink *pulque*, and the day after that they walk back. That means three days lost; and then it's usually Friday or Saturday, so it's no use starting work till Monday."

In the court-yard three Indio labourers were engaged in mending an antediluvian cart made of—I am not exaggerating—four-inch thick boards. They had been doing it when Señor Raquita and I started for our ride, and they were still at it when we came back. Señor Raquita rode up to them and a desultory conversation ensued. Why are they mending the cart without Trinidad? Señor Raquita wished to know. Silence; six oblong eyes stare at him inscrutably, mysteriously. Where is Trinidad? Silence again and more staring. Has Trinidad gone to the pub? An irresolute: "No, Señor"; one of the Indios volunteers the information that Trinidad may have gone to see his wife. No, that can't be, decides Señor Raquita; what would he want to see her for? Perhaps he is in the stables attending to the sick foal? Nobody knows, nobody cares. Señor Raquita sighs, and, abandoning the subject of Trinidad, enquires what is wrong with the cart and why can't they put it right. The nuts are too small for the screws? Well, why not get bigger nuts? Has anybody an idea where that wretch Trinidad keeps

the nuts? Silent shaking of heads; one old Indio scratches his back meditatively; a youngster, tired of so much talking, squats down on the ground and lights a cigarette. Señor Raquita, his lined face looking more tormented than ever, rides off to the stables.

He is back soon. No, Trinidad is not in the stables, he announces in a lugubrious voice. When did he go? and in what direction? The labourers ignore the first question—a good Indio, like a Yogi, lives beyond the dimension of time—and answer the second by indicating the direction with their liquid eyes. Señor Raquita reflects, and the outcome of his reflections is a series of orders. Enrique is to go to the village and look for Trinidad, first at the pub and then at his wife's place. Salvador has to find Santiago and tell him to bring—*urgente*, mind you—all the screws and nuts he can lay his hand on; while Jesus will go and bandage the sick foal. Then an afterthought comes to Señor Raquita. Perhaps that rascal Trinidad is in the wash-house: he sometimes goes there to have a nap. So we ride to the wash-house. It is empty and filthy and smells of *pulque*. Señor Raquita shakes his noble head. "What people! What lazy people!" he mutters, with suffering in his eyes. . . .

We had lunch—a primitive affair consisting chiefly of chili pepper in various forms; then the bailiff and the workmen had their siesta, while I sat on the smashed aqueduct and gazed at the impossible blue of the sky. After the siesta the work on the broken cart was resumed, still without Trinidad. Señor Raquita had another long talk with the men, and finally reached the conclusion that Trinidad must have gone to see his uncle, who had borrowed a peso from him and was slow in repaying it. So one of the men was detailed to the uncle's place, which was three miles away, and Señor Raquita turned to me.

"Would it please you, Señor," he asked, politely bending forward in the saddle, "to ride round the estate once more?" But after the morning ride the epidermis on certain parts of my body had grown so tender that I had to decline his invitation. I had not sat on a horse for twenty-three years.

By sunset Trinidad was still away, and the cart showed a heavy list on the starboard side, the conscientious Indios having unscrewed everything they could unscrew. "They don't know how to work, they don't," muttered Señor Raquita dolefully.

Evening. It is very cold, almost freezing, in the huge unheated house. I have put on my sweater and my mac-kintosh; Señor Raquita walks about wrapped Indian-fashion in a blanket. The house is now completely isolated from the outer world: the heavy front gate and all the front doors are locked and bolted, the bunch of heavy medieval keys hangs in Señor Raquita's belt next to the revolver. One feels as in a besieged fortress.

We are having supper in the kitchen: I, Señor Raquita and his wife, a middle-aged little Spanish woman who talks very indistinctly and at a tremendous speed, smiling the whole time. I can hardly understand what she says; Señor Raquita probably understands her only too well, and therefore does not listen; he stares past her at the colossal cooking-stove in which a tiny fire is flickering, and a melancholy tired dream glows dully in his pupils.

The Señora offers me a dish of some coal-black porridge with an acid smell.

"Please, Señor, have some," she begs, with an engaging

smile, and pours out a torrent of words praising, so far as I can make out, the quality of the smelly stuff.

"No, thank you very much, Señora," I say, bowing, "I have no appetite to-night."

"The Señor doesn't like our food?"

"I love it, Señora, but I've eaten enough,"

"Oh no, Señor, you haven't, you have eaten very, very, very little," she squeaks, and with two tiny child's fingers she shows how very little I have eaten. "You are a big man and a young man and strong, so you must eat a lot."

To drive home her point she delivers a long story about a nephew of hers who also ate little, with the result that he himself, his cousins and all the cows of their *hacienda* caught small-pox and had to leave for Toluca at dawn. At least, that is what I understand her to say.

In the middle of the night I was awakened by some sinister noises. The windows and the doors were rattling, inside the walls a thousand rats seemed to be fighting, bits of plaster were dropping from the ceiling. "What the devil are the old fools doing at this hour?" I wondered, thinking of the Raquita couple whose room was right above mine. Plop—and a bit of plaster fell on my legs, and simultaneously there was a sound of broken glass. "They must be dancing," I decided, and, cursing Mexican customs, pulled the blanket over my head. But I had to switch on the light when somebody started moving my bed, and then I saw that the bulb in the centre of the room was swinging widely on its wire. An earthquake! I knew that the first thing to do in an earthquake was to get out into the open, and I tried to sit up, but my epidermis reminded me so vividly of my yesterday's ride

that I sank back with a groan. Damn the earthquake, I thought. It couldn't be as dangerous as people made out, and, anyhow, the five blankets under which I was sleeping must considerably soften the impact of the ceiling should it collapse.

There were high hills to right and left of the *hacienda*, and I asked Señor Raquita whether it was easy to get to the top.

"Yes, Señor, quite easy," he said. "There are plenty of paths."

"Good ones?"

"Yes, Señor."

"The hills on the left seem to be higher."

"They are higher, Señor."

That settled the matter. I swung my rucksack on my back and set off. He stopped me.

"Are you going there, Señor?" he asked, pointing to the left.

"Yes, Señor."

"I wouldn't if I were you."

"Why not?"

"Because of *mala gente*" (bad people).

"You mean bandits?"

"No, not bandits, Señor. *Mala gente*."

"Why are they *mala*. Do they kill people? Or rob?"

"No, Señor, they don't kill or rob. They are unfriendly."

"I don't want their friendliness."

"They may stop you and tell you to go back."

"Why?"

"I don't know, Señor, but they do it. Last year two American friends of Señor Arvañez who were staying at Jalupa went there, and the *mala gente* did not let them pass. They are unfriendly people."

And that was all I could get out of him. Later on I heard that the same thing happened in various parts of Mexico, both to foreigners and the Mexican hikers. One of the explanations was that pagan cults were still alive in the mountains and the Indios were afraid that strangers might stumble upon their idols.

As I dislike being bossed, I tackled the hills on the right. The panorama from the top was queer and crooked rather than beautiful. I am used to European mountains, which always have some sort of a plan enabling one to distinguish between the basic design and the subsidiary embroidery, whereas here everything was mixed up: valleys and ridges and ravines seemed to run in all directions at once, the truncated cones grew where they had no business to grow—as though a Heath Robinson had taken a bit of the Alps and remoulded them in his inimitably paranoiac manner. As I found on the way back, it is surprisingly easy to get lost in this higgledy-piggledy agglomeration of peaks, slopes and ravines.

On the third day depression came over me. The immense emptiness of the *hacienda*, the dead stillness of the cold, tall rooms, and most of all Señor Raquita with his tormented face, his pathetic politeness and the undying sorrow in his eyes—I could not bear it any longer and left Jalupa.

As I was walking towards the main road I saw a young Indio standing in the ditch by the track. He had a

blanket thrown over his shoulder and stood perfectly motionless, in a stupor of contemplation. He seemed not to notice me, not even when I crossed the line of his gaze. There was something inhuman and uncanny in that aimless concentration, and after having walked a few yards I felt compelled to glance back. I am sure I caught the very end of the movement of his head as he jerked it back into its former position. I stopped and lit a cigarette, watching him furtively out of the corner of my eye. But he did not move any more, he kept staring at the imaginary point beyond the road.

Said Lydia when I came back:

"You've missed an interesting performance. Mrs. Swanson was here yesterday, and oh, she was priceless! She began with complaining about Margaret—Margaret Wills, whose father has just died. 'You know, dear,' Mrs. Swanson said to me, 'I was shopping at Sanborne's when whom do I see but Margaret! "Hullo," she says to me, "I'm so glad to see you." And then she says: "Don't you want a tea-set by any chance, because there is a very pretty one across the road?" You know, dear, I was positively dumbfounded. Imagine worrying about a tea-set only two days after her dear father's funeral! I felt so upset that at first I simply didn't know what to say to her. You see, my trouble is that I'm so terribly sensitive. All my friends tell me that my nerves are on the surface, and it's quite true, they are. I suppose that's because I come from a diplomatic family.' " (Her father, Lydia added, had been Secretary of the British Consulate in Mexico.) " 'When I was young we used to move from one country to another, so I met people of all nationalities, and that, of course,

sharpens the nerves, if you know what I mean. But I never expected that of Margaret! That she should be so heartless, so cruelly heartless, that beats me flat! So I said to her: "No, thank you, dear," I said, "I won't bother about the tea-set, *not to-day*, anyhow." I guess she realised what I meant by "not to-day"; she grew sort of confused and said: "I'm sorry, I must rush now. . . ."

"Sounds straight from a novel," I remarked. "Did she stay long?"

"Ages. First she pulled Margaret to pieces, then Mrs. Cordillo, then she talked about the car she is getting and why it must be fast, much faster than ours. Then she complained of poverty. . . ."

"Familiar tunes," I interjected. "Making a poor mouth, as the Irish say."

"And she stayed and stayed. I had played all my records and grown deaf and dumb, but she still went on talking. Till nearly seven. I had to go and wash my face after she'd left: I had a feeling it was dirty. And then I tried to understand why such women exist, but I couldn't. Can you?"

"Easily. They are the natural by-product of our stupid Money Civilisation, in which income is completely divorced from all social functions. In London alone you have half a million of such by-products. I see them every day in our street: elderly females who spend their days sitting with their Pokes by the window or walking with them from one lamp-post to another. In a properly organised society they would be put to sleep—with their pets—or sent to work in some evil-smelling factory. . . . But, if I may ask a personal question, why didn't you, in accordance with your theory of universal tolerance, try to get something good out of dear Mrs. Swanson? She can't

possibly be bad all through: as a Russian philosopher observed, even a pig doesn't consist of piggishness only."

Lydia gave me a long look, and her eyes lit up with a smile.

"One up to you," she said, and offered me a cigarette.

Lydia had gone to town to pay some official visit, and I was sitting smoking on the veranda. Next to me Jim and Xenia were quarrelling half-heartedly about a piece of string which, so far as one could make out, they had stolen first from Mary and then from each other. In conclusion, Xenia called Jim "bloody fool" and gracefully rushed out before he had time to think of a repartee. Jim, thus left with unexpressed anger in his system, felt unhappy. To comfort him I said:

"Equanimity comes first. A true philosopher mustn't mind even if somebody hits him on the head with a telegraph-pole."

He eyed me mistrustfully, uncertain whether I was laughing at him or just talking rubbish. Anyhow, he decided to assert his masculinity.

"If anyone hit me," he said truculently, "I would hit him back as hard as I could."

"An excellent if not very original idea," I said. "The point, however, is not what you do, but what you feel, not your action, but your attitude. You are free in your actions, you may smash as many skulls as you like—they are cheap nowadays—but you mustn't get angry before or after. For anger absorbs enormous quantities of energy, and no one—not even you—has the right to waste his energy."

Jim glanced at me, blinked, turned to the apricot tree and gave it a few pensive kicks. Mary, who was sitting on the steps and combing the stupider of the two mongrels, said, addressing no one in particular:

“What is a philosopher?”

I kept silent, leaving the answer to Jim.

“A philosopher is a man who thinks,” said Jim, and turned to me for confirmation. “Isn’t that so, Mr. Gubsky?”

“Absolutely.”

“What does he think about?” enquired Mary, administering a hard slap to the mongrel who was beginning to fidget under the comb.

“About the world and things like that,” said Jim.

“Just sits and thinks?”

As Jim did not know the correct answer to that I stepped in.

“He needn’t necessarily sit,” I said. “He may lie or stand on his head, but that’s rather difficult: only the very best thinkers in a country called India can do that.”

“India?” echoed Mary. “Is that in Mexico?”

“You silly.” This from Jim, impatiently. “India is a place in Asia, of course. . . . Mr. Gubsky, why are the Indians here called Indians? They aren’t from India, are they?”

“No, they aren’t. You see—” and I delivered a lucid discourse on the subject. I was sorry the boy was less interested in the preservation of human vitality than in the origin of the tedious Indios. After all, whether he knew anything about their history or not would not affect his life in any way, whereas if he mismanaged his stock of energy he would be miserable himself and make other people miserable. But such is the spirit of the age: the

most futile of facts seems more important to us than the understanding of our Ego and its psycho-physical economics.

In the garden Jim was throwing his newly acquired lasso at Cecil's walking-stick, which was planted into the ground. The lasso being an extremely unwieldy weapon, he continually hit Mary, who was having a confidential talk with Bang-Ho miles away from the stick. "I'm sorry, Mary," he would exclaim automatically, and Mary would brush off the loop with an equally automatic gesture. After that had happened a dozen times she got up and dragged Bang-Ho into the farthest corner of the garden. From the veranda one could hear the severe admonishing notes of her voice: "You naughty, naughty dog, if I see you again chasing that cat . . ."

I was talking shop to Lydia.

"Literature becomes more and more commercialised. Take reviewing. The editors, like the cinema producers, believe in 'giving the public what it wants,' which in practice means playing to the gallery. Commerce is after quantity; therefore a literary critic is made to review some two hundred books a year, which is enough to blunt anybody's perception—as demonstrated by the fact that on an average three talents and one genius are discovered every week. Finally, since the papers have to keep in with the publishers on whom they depend for ads., frankness is tabooed. Out of the two hundred novels a critic reviews in a year at least one hundred and eighty are utter trash, which should never have been written or published. But the critic mustn't say that, he must be diplomatic. So he writes: '*Hekuba in the Underground* is quite an interest-

ing novel, although not the best that has come from Mary Sweetfill's pen. It is somewhat lacking in vigour, characterisation, construction and sincerity; its plot is vague and the writing shaky, but certain scenes, such as the conversation at grandmama's breakfast-table, are convincingly done, and the description of the cosy Sussex lanes will appeal to many a nature-lover.' "

In the meantime Jim's lasso had got caught in the branches of the apricot tree and he climbed up to disentangle it. Bang-Ho, who had espied a dog on the road, had broken away from Mary's moral solicitude, dashed out of the garden and vanished in the desert. An Indian beggar woman had stopped at the gate and mumbled something about Charity and Jesus until Lydia sent her a copper. "Mother of God . . . all the saints . . ." came back in a piteous whine.

These incidents made me forget what I had to say about commercialism, so I asked Lydia what she thought of D. H. Lawrence.

"Very uneven; on the whole, second-rate," she said. "What he wrote about Mexico is all piffle; everybody who knows Mexico laughs at it. . . . But how is it that people, both in England and the States, take his sexual stuff seriously? Even people like"—and she mentioned the names of some Leading Thinkers. "It's rubbish, and it smells unpleasant, too; yet they seem to find some deep philosophy in it."

"Just as the Germans find a deep philosophy in that puerile talk about Aryan purity. After their defeat the Germans desperately needed some dope to restore their self-assurance; hence the Gospel according to St. Hitler. And the Anglo-Saxons realised at last that after centuries of puritanic suppression of sex an aphrodisiac would do them good, so when Lawrence started slobbering about

soft femininity and dark masculinity they raised him to the rank of prophet."

"It's amazing what poor stuff people read in general," said Lydia in a tone of regret. "Look at the best sellers, they are awful."

"Not all of them. There is no rhyme or reason in the public's taste; you can't even say they choose what is bad, because some best sellers are good: take *San Michele* or *The Good Earth* or *Peking Picnic*, or some of Wodehouse's books. . . . Do you read detective novels?"

"I used to, but I can't now. They are too boring."

"That's because they are really short stories unnaturally distended to the length of a novel. Conan Doyle would have done them in fifteen pages; now they run into three hundred. Commerce again: the paper manufacturer gains, the publisher gains, the author gains, and the public gets its dope and feels happy."

Bang-Ho returned from his expedition. He was wearing an expression of coy satisfaction, and there were some dark wet smudges of blood on his muzzle, which he was licking. Mary's face as she noticed them contracted into a piteous grimace; she turned and ran away, her shoulders shaking with noiseless sobs. Lydia seized Cecil's stick and chased the bloody dog into the backyard, whereupon we proceeded to draw up a list of novels which ought to be best sellers, but were not. The list was headed by H. H. Richardson's *Maurice Guest*, probably the best novel of the century, and contained such obscure items as Bruce Marshall's *Uncertain Glory*, Lania's *Pilgrims Without a Shrine*, Sobolev's *Storm Warning* (I happened to know that it sold exactly 250 copies), van der Meersch's *Invasion '14* and some more.

"How did *Angry Dust* sell?" she asked.

"Middling. Just enough to keep me going on the

lowest standard for a year. Which is more than any other book of mine has done."

"Do you know yourself how good it is?"

"No, I can never judge my own stuff. One moment it seems to me very good, the next very bad. But *Angry Dust* is probably good, judging by the response it has evoked. At home I have a bunch of letters from about a hundred readers who tell me all about it. No doubt Ursula Bloom's or Beverley Nichols's fan-mail is much bigger, but the point is that with a few exceptions my correspondents are intelligent people and often say things worth saying."

"Haven't you any of their letters with you?"

"No. Only one, to which I'm going to treat you now."

I fetched the letter and read, omitting the beginning, which was not lively enough:

"... Foreign dirt has come pouring in from America and now from refugees like you from Europe, and God only knows where it will end. Of course dirt exists and illicit so-called love and lavatories and all your sensations before and after; but why, why must we read and think about such things? You are merely a tom cat—or a cur dog one sees sniffing around, but one does not want to read or think about these poor animals. 'Angry Mud' or whatever you are, can't you rise out of the slime? You have a soul—can't you awaken it? That God-given spark lies dormant in the most bestial—can't you kill the beast and be born again into a Man? You have a gift for writing—use it to some good purpose. Take knotted cords and give yourself a real good thrashing every day; then take good healthy exercise and a cold bath, and read about our Lord and Master and how He preached self-sacrifice. Copy Him and kneel and ask forgiveness of

your wife, and try, before it is too late, to be a real father to your two children. It is to be hoped they have not read 'Angry Slush'—write new and clean books they can read and admire. . . . You have turned the corner and your books are beginning to sell. Cultivate the spirit and drop the beast.

"From one who feels deeply."

Lydia chuckled. "Gosh!" was her comment. "It's a woman, of course."

"Sure to be. And a flaming virgin at that. . . . But to come back to the book. To my mind the most important thing in it was neither the story of my life nor my frankness, but the last chapter, the philosophical one. I thought it was of immense value to all those who like myself have lost religion and the old system of morality which was based on religion. Man is so made that he can't live quite without morality, from hand to mouth, so to speak; sooner or later he gets fed up with his purposeless undirected freedom, and then he finds himself facing the old, old question, the most important question of all philosophies: What shall I do about myself? It's no use telling him: Do this or Do that, as all moralists do, because such general precepts are always based on some premise or other, and the modern man won't accept anything on faith—at any rate not for long. His only way of building up a time-proof morality is to work it out on the principle of self-determination: in himself, by himself and for himself.

"In *Angry Dust* I tried to show how he can do it by means of a particular inner effort which I shall call self-detachment or dissociation. Naïvely I expected a tremendous response. None came. Out of a hundred correspondents who liked my book and therefore must

have been in sympathy with my way of thinking, only five or six were sufficiently impressed by my disquisition to mention the subject at all, and only one vaguely spoke of practising the method. That was a blow to the preacher in me. I simply couldn't understand how people could have missed the most valuable part of my book. Perhaps you can tell me the reason? Was I not clear enough?"

"Yes, you were clear," said Lydia, "but not . . . not convincing. Somehow you didn't convey—at least to me you didn't—why it was so important, and that, I'm afraid, is your fault. If you ask me, you tried to say too much in too little space. I may be mistaken, of course . . ."

"No, you must be right, for that's what I suspected myself. The subject is too big and too unfamiliar to be dealt with in twenty pages. Well, I won't repeat this mistake now, with you. I shall leave out all theory and confine myself to the practice of self-detachment; and when I've finished you may ask me any theoretical questions you like. Will that do?"

"All right. Only one question before you go on: is this your own method or have you taken it from somebody?"

"It's a hotch-potch, for which the beef comes from the Yoga—Karma Yoga, some vegetables from a woman psychologist I knew once, and others from my own experience which I gathered in practising self-detachment. . . Well then, as I said, amongst my correspondents there was one, a woman, who seemed to be really interested in the method. I had a twenty-page letter from her in which she told me all about her private life. She was married and her husband had been languishing for three years—mind you, three years—at the feet of a cold and heartless Miriam. She, the wife, lived in a state

of abject misery and was clearly on the verge of neurasthenia; she loved him, but couldn't reconcile herself to the part of a nominal wife; she wanted to leave him, but hadn't the strength to do so. She said that my method—I call it mine for short—was her last chance of escaping final demoralisation; and what should she do? I wrote her a long letter. I said that at the moment she must give up trying to alter the situation one way or another, because whatever she were to attempt in her present state of turmoil, were it a rapprochement with her husband or a withdrawal from him, would end in failure and a mess; before tackling her relationship with him she should forget all about it, concentrate on herself and put herself in order; and when she had put herself in order she would, without asking anybody's advice, know what to do. She wrote back saying that she saw her way clearly now and would begin to practise my method at once. And then, in the same letter, she proceeded to bombard me with questions: Did I think it would be better if she saw less of her husband? should she have a frank talk with the Other Woman? or should she move to a hotel for a week or a month? It was exasperating. Not that she was dense, by no means; she simply couldn't take in the idea that all problems of our inner life should be tackled from the introspective end, within ourselves, and not from the practical end, the end of action. When our car doesn't run well we stop, we examine the engine, and don't proceed until we have found the cause of the trouble and removed it. But when things go wrong with us, when we feel miserable or helpless or undecided, it never enters our mind to stop, lift our bonnet and put our triple mechanism—body, emotion and intellect—right before proceeding. No, we go on driving as before or even step on the accelerator, forcing our engine the more

cruelly the steeper the hill we have to climb. . . . Do you see the difference?"

"I think I do," said Lydia. "Let me tell you an experience of mine, and you'll tell me whether it's what you mean. This happened to me at the time when I was trying to part from Ivan. I couldn't bring myself to do it, and in the end I fell ill with the strain. I lay in bed month after month worrying about him and Cecil and the children and everything; and all that time I had a distinct feeling that I was on the wrong track, that my worrying only made things worse; but I couldn't think what else I could do. And then one morning—the doctors had given me up by then—I suddenly realised that both solutions were right and wrong at the same time: from one point of view it was wrong to stay with Ivan and from another it was right. And the same about Cecil. That was a great relief to me, because then I saw that it was no use brooding over it any longer, and I must think of myself, because Cecil or no Cecil the children would need me in any case. Nobody was at home that morning. I called Joaquina—the maid—and told her to pack some things for me and get a taxi. She took me to the station and put me in the train, and off I went to Acapulco, which is a lovely place on the Pacific coast—we must take you there one day. There in Acapulco I lived all by myself, lying on the beach all day long, doing nothing and thinking of nothing, just looking at the sea. You know I adore the sea, I can look at it for hours and hours and never be bored. At first I was so weak that two attendants had to carry me down to the beach and back to the hotel; but I got stronger very rapidly and one day all of a sudden, without thinking or worrying, I knew what I had to do. I went back home and said good-bye to Ivan, and I knew it was the right thing to do. . . .

Is that what you meant by stopping the wastage of energy?"

"Exactly. It's a perfect illustration. The inner friction of the conflict had exhausted you, and the more you worried and struggled the less you were fit to act. To be able to act you had to stop wasting your energy, and that you did in the only way in which it can be done: by detaching yourself from the turmoil of your senses. Once energy—the psycho-physical vitality of the Great Body, and not physical health only—had returned to its normal level, you, the whole of you, knew how to settle your conflict, and then action, the right action, followed spontaneously, without any effort. . . . That is what religious people can do deliberately, at will—I mean, of course, not the average churchgoer, but those who have a genuine strong faith: they can attain self-detachment through prayer, by making their consciousness 'lean out' towards the Deity. The irreligious ones haven't got a ready technique of self-detachment and only hit upon it sporadically, in a crisis, by chance as it were, although it isn't really a chance: the instinct of self-preservation gives them the hint. Unfortunately, later on they forget how they did it, and when a new trouble arises they resort to the habitual wrong method: they mobilise their so-called will, they strain, they puff and pant and hypnotise themselves: 'I won't worry, I won't, I won't.' Which is exactly as futile as trying to lift oneself by the scruff of one's neck: all they achieve is an increase in the waste of energy. . . . Shall I go on? Or have you had enough?"

"No, I want to hear more. But let's go to the park," said Lydia, with a glance at Xenia, who had come out on to the veranda and was crossly asking Jim some question, the same question over and over again, to which he

replied by whistling provocatively. "These two are going to quarrel in a minute, so we'd better be off."

In the park I continued, or rather I began from the beginning:

"I always disliked the way I was made. I was too impatient, too excitable and restless, not steady enough, never satisfied with what I had got, and therefore often unhappy, acutely unhappy. My Great Body, meaning the triune combination of physical body, emotion and intellect, was in a state of perpetual anarchy and therefore worked badly, much worse than it might. I was vaguely aware of that and I wanted to change myself, but I didn't know in what direction or how to go about it.

"Religion was of no use to me. I couldn't accept Christian theology, and Christian morality with the stress it lays on kindness, didn't suit me. Surely, I thought, there were other values besides kindness, which is often but weakness in disguise.

"At one time the lofty doctrine of the Bhagavad Gita fascinated me. But I soon realised that I could not live up to the exacting demands of the Yoga, so that my interest in it was but a cerebral flirtation.

"Philosophy I found utterly sterile. It all grew out of the brain, not out of the Great Body; it satisfied reason—sometimes—but it didn't help one to live, and it didn't answer my main question: How can I change myself? The only philosopher who gave me the feeling that he understood something about life was Nietzsche; but then I found it difficult to understand his language.

"Will, too, proved quite inadequate as a means of

changing myself. For instance, I would will myself not to be excited, and at best I only succeeded in hiding my agitation from other people. More than that, willing seemed to strengthen those disorganising forces in me which I set out to conquer. I came up against this paradoxical fact—but not its explanation—when as an adolescent I was fighting lust. (Not that lust is necessarily a disorganising force, but it was so for me at the time.) I fought it in the English way, by going for long walks, doing Swedish gym., taking cold baths and so filling in my time as not to leave one moment unoccupied. The result was negative: I grew more unhappy, the lustful images pursued me more insistently. Tired of the struggle, I gave up the walks, the gym., the cold baths, and at once there was a marked improvement.

“For many years I continued working on myself with my will, simply because I couldn’t think of any other tool I could use. It let me down time after time, in everyday life and in crises. The feeling grew in me that I was stationary and my wish to change would never be fulfilled, couldn’t be fulfilled.

“Four years ago I got into that serious mess over Miriam. At the end of this pathetic but instructive affair, which wasn’t even an affair, I was a broken man, physically and morally. I had had three months of insomnia, and deep apathy possessed me; the thought of death as a relief and a rest haunted me. Worst of all, I felt that all by myself I should never be able to scramble out of the misery I was in. I had no vitality left for the initial effort; only some extraneous force could take me out of the vicious circle of gloom generating weakness and weakness producing more gloom.

“In our rational civilisation you can at a moment’s notice get any amount of information about the breeding

of dragon-flies, sixteen-inch guns and Aztec grammar. But if you want to know how to replenish spent vitality and put your Great Body in order you find no one who could help you. It was only by chance that I stumbled upon the cure for my sickness. I mean self-detachment.

"Its basis is that very, very old principle of self-knowledge which you find in the teaching of Socrates and in all the Yogas. To mend a car you must know its mechanism; to change anything in yourself you must know the functions of your Great Body and its three interrelated systems; physical body, emotion and intellect. Ordinary introspection—brooding as some people call it—is of no use whatever, for it means looking at your trouble from inside, through the eyes of that same trouble, and that of course won't add a grain to your understanding of it. The only method by which self-knowledge can be acquired is self-detachment: to know yourself you must dissociate, split into two: the knower and the object of knowing. Every one of us has had those dreams in which, while throbbing with horror, he at the same time stands outside himself and remembers that there is no need for him to be afraid, because nothing of what is happening around him can affect him. That outside position is the one you have to take up if you want to acquire self-knowledge and, later on, control the functions of your Great Body.* You did that when, exhausted

* Readers interested in the theoretical side of these problems are referred to the extremely intelligent and lucid book *Yoga and Western Psychology* by Geraldine Coster. She writes about self-detachment: "We can all become aware of the workings of our mento-emotional nature as of something objective, something other than that which is observing it; and we can to some extent control it. Moreover, most people have had, in moments of material or spiritual emergency, the experience of conscious withdrawal from the swirl of anxious thought and bewildering emotion into a state of calm impersonal stillness and certainty."

by your conflict, you pushed it aside and decided just to get strong. Nadya does it in critical circumstances as, for instance, when Kiril came home one day with a broken arm, or when Xenia fell on a nail. As she puts it, she then 'gets out of her skin' and stands at a distance from her active self, telling it not to worry and not to hurry. And there is a young gypsy—Mara's sister, in fact—who without having read one clever book or discussed these things with anybody, has worked out a rough version of the method entirely by herself. Only a gypsy with her amazingly strong instincts could do it! To preserve the instinctive flavour of her reasoning I shall reproduce it exactly as I heard it. I was so struck by what she told me that I wrote it all down as soon as I came home that day.

"Imagine a little woman of thirty with huge coal-black eyes, coal-black hair and an un-European fixedness in her look, reclining lazily on the sofa, smoking one cigarette after another and talking in a singsong, unhurriedly and indifferently, as though she knew her story couldn't interest anybody.

" 'As a rule I enjoy seeing people and I go out a lot, but sometimes I want to be alone, and when I'm in that mood and people ring me up I tell them I'm engaged for a week ahead. I'm never bored when alone, because then I tell stories to myself, stories which I invent as I go on: all sorts of terrible dramas and funny stuff and adventures. If something interrupts me in the middle I say to myself: *To be continued*, and later on I resume at the point where I've left off. That's why I used to have blisters on my hands: when listening to my stories I would take a dish out of the oven forgetting that it was hot and, naturally, I would burn myself. I tried to write down some of my stories, but it never came off, my writing

was always unnatural, not my own, and I haven't the patience to think of sentences.

“ ‘We have no maid now, so I have to do the housework, which I hated at first, but I don't any more, because now I have my philosophy. It's my own gypsy philosophy, which I found all by myself, without any books. You'll probably laugh, but I'll tell you what it's about.

“ ‘You see this cup? Now suppose I take it and move it over there. It looks as if my hand did it, but really it isn't my hand but a point here in my head. If that point doesn't want the cup to move, my hand won't touch it and it won't move. Well, that made me think. For instance, once when I was sad and felt a weight on my heart, I thought that my heart must be only a tool, like my hand, and therefore if the point in my head didn't want my heart to feel sad, it wouldn't feel sad. So I tried, and the sadness went. I can't explain how I did it, I'm not intelligent enough to explain things; all I know is that you just have to think of that point in the head and not make any effort. Then I made some other experiments. With asparagus, for instance. I loathed asparagus, the sight of it made me sick; so now I bought six tins of asparagus, opened one and began to eat. I didn't say to myself: Oh, how delicious! because it wasn't delicious at all; I simply ate and ate and waited to see what would happen—thinking of that point in the head, of course. And d'you know, when I'd got half-way through the tin I found the taste wasn't nasty any more, and when I opened the second tin I found I quite liked it. After that I tried slugs. They are revolting, and before, when I found one in the cabbage, I used to fling the cabbage into the slop pail. So now I cut a cabbage up specially to get a slug, and of course there was none, so I had to

ring up for more cabbages and cut them all up until I got a slug, a fat one. Well, I picked it up and put it in a jar, then I covered the jar with a book, placed it on my night table, and every morning on awakening I would sit up, lift the book and touch the slug with my finger. And after three or four days I ceased to mind the slug; but just then it began to shrivel and smell, so my husband told me to throw it away. . . . And the same with the blisters. I don't get them any more, because when I've burnt my hand I don't yell Oy! as I used to, but instead I quickly say to myself that my hand is my tool, and if that point in my head doesn't want any blisters there will be none. And there are none, I don't know why.

“ ‘Then the housework. Before, I used to grow tired in an hour, because I'm a lazy person. So one day I said to myself that whether I got tired or not also depended on that point, and I decided to wash the whole kitchen. I got a ladder and put it against the wall. I soaked the rag at the sink, got up the ladder and washed a bit of the wall; then I climbed down, went to the sink again, soaked the rag and got up the ladder again. And so I went on. It's terribly strenuous work, you know, and I was at it from morning till three, missing lunch; and yet, would you believe it? I didn't feel tired, or not very much.

“ ‘You remember Palo, my Spaniel? He isn't here to-day, because he was stolen a month ago. Now, I have no children and Palo was like a child to me. He understood everything I said to him—honestly he did—and he wouldn't listen to anyone but me, not even to my husband. Well, if he had been stolen a year ago—when I didn't have my gypsy philosophy as I call it—I should be heartbroken now and you would see me with red eyelids,

for I did love Palo. But I wasn't heartbroken. My husband said to me: I can't understand you, you loved Palo and yet you don't miss him. That was because of that point in the head. I'd been to the police and advertised three times in the *Daily Telegraph*, so I'd done all I could, but as for crying and pining—well, that only makes one's nose swell and wouldn't help me to get Palo back. So whenever I started feeling sad I would think of that point and the wish to cry would pass . . . Or take my mother. I love her with my whole heart, as a daughter should; but I know that when she dies—she's old and may die soon—I won't be upset, not very much. What's the good? We must all die. Had she died a year ago I should have been mad with sorrow, but I shan't be now, because I know how not to.

“ ‘That's what I call my gypsy philosophy. You may laugh at it, but it helps me a lot, I feel happier since I discovered it. The way I reason is this: Everybody at birth is given certain portions of things which he has to eat in his lifetime: a plateful of joy, a plateful of work, a plateful of sorrow. Whether he likes it or not, it must all be eaten, he can't wriggle out of that, because that's fate: I'm a gypsy, so I believe in fate. The question is only how he's going to eat it, whether quietly or grumbling. Well, I've found that grumbling makes one feel sad, and as I don't want to be sad I eat my plateful quietly and I find it quite easy to live.’ ”

“Interesting, isn't it? Instinctive wisdom, coming not from the brain, but from the whole of the woman, her Great Body. Now, her way of producing the state of self-detachment consists in imagining a point in her head and observing herself from that point. Mine is a little different. I imagine my double, who has my consciousness but without any of my mental habits or conflicts,

an open-minded consciousness, so to speak, whose only function is to study me and know me. That double lives within me, attached to me by a piece of strong elastic. To get him to work I pull the elastic until he is a couple of yards away from me; then I make him turn and look at what is going on in me. The elastic never works automatically (I've never used it before, so the habit couldn't have arisen); it always has to be pulled, I always have to make an effort to overcome its resistance and continue making that effort to prevent it from snapping back. It may sound easy, but it isn't. To form an idea of how difficult it is, take some object, a pencil for instance, look at it and try to think of nothing but the pencil: you'll be exhausted in sixty seconds if you try really hard.

"Sometimes the resistance of the elastic is so great that I can't produce the double at all, or only for a few moments; that usually happens when my vitality is low—during 'flu or after a spell of insomnia—or when I'm up against my strongest and worst habit, the habit of worrying about Nadya. Sometimes the elastic does stretch, but not far enough; in these cases my double doesn't separate sufficiently from me; some of my trouble still clings to him, and therefore he can't focus me, can't see me the right way, dispassionately and indifferently. On other occasions, dissociation happens quickly and easily. But it's never complete, I can never overcome the last few inches, that is to say, place my double at that point at which I am exactly, perfectly in his focus. If I ever achieve that—which is highly doubtful—I shall be able to bear my pain, for instance, as easily as I bear the pain of your Antonia. . . . This trick of mine is a bit crude, since distance—those two yards—oughtn't to come into it; and one day I'll try and improve it. But it serves me for the moment.

"I remember my first experience of successful dissociation. This was four years ago, soon after Miriam had dropped me. One afternoon I was walking on Wimbledon Common. It was March; the sun shone bright and warm, but that, by contrast, only made me feel more depressed. And then it happened, all of a sudden, without any conscious preparation: I was outside myself looking at what was going on in me and seeing it from an entirely new angle. The first thing I saw was that my misery affected not the whole of me, not my Great Body, as I imagined, but only my physical body: it was the protest of thwarted sex, and nothing else. A child when it has hurt its knee doesn't know how to locate the pain: it feels that its body is bruised all over, that nobody loves it and the whole world is wicked. In the same way my purely sexual suffering—for apart from physical attraction there was no bond between the woman and myself—had spread over the whole of me until it had saturated and disorganised both the emotional and the intellectual systems. The discovery came with a shock which was followed by a sense of relief, for I knew at once, with complete assurance, that now I could and would overcome my misery.

"On the face of it that assurance of mine was unwarranted: what difference did it make that I had seen my inner state in a new light? Well, the difference was there, an enormous one: from that moment I started picking up more rapidly than I could have hoped for. Why? Because seeing—clear, detached seeing—is consciousness, and consciousness is not passive perception as we think, but an active force. We may assume that consciousness and will are two aspects of the same thing, that little known life-force which emanates not from body alone or emotion alone or intellect alone, as do our

ordinary thoughts and everyday wills, but from the whole of man, his Great Body.*. . . This, however, is philosophising, and I must try to confine myself to practice.

"My son is in the habit of whistling at home. I can't bear whistling and I forbid it, but he continually forgets the prohibition. Whenever I hear that hateful sharp sound a catch shifts in me, releasing the habitual emotion of irritation. If I don't do anything about it the emotion attains its full growth in about two seconds; then comes the automatic shout: 'Stop whistling, will you', and for a few minutes after that I'm aware of a weakness in myself: my irritation has burnt up so many units of my vitality, my thoughts are diffuse, I experience a semi-physical dissatisfaction. Before, I tried to suppress irritation by will, I forbade myself to shout, and I didn't shout; but all I achieved was that both irritation and the subsequent weakness lasted longer; what I gained in outward control I lost in inner disorganisation. Therein, by the way, lies the refutation of the traditional conception of self-control: all it does is to drive the disorganising emotion deeper into the Great Body, where it produces a set of other negative, that is to say disorganising, states: inhibitions and physical diseases.

"That whistling business was the first on which I tried self-detachment. I would pull the elastic. If I did it quickly enough and the elastic worked well, the double at the end of it would see the irritation in me before it had

* Cf. *Yoga and Western Psychology*: "There are some to whom the most convincing 'self' experience is that in which at times brief flashes of will direct both mind and body, and such people are often dimly aware that the process is not a mental one. Others have never had this awareness. In them the will works relatively seldom, their mode of living being almost entirely automatic, for in the vast majority of human beings at the present stage of evolution will is an embryonic power and very little understood."

time to condense. He would look at the incipient disturbance and locate it: it has its seat somewhere in the region of the diaphragm. He did not prevent me from ordering the boy to be quiet, for his function is not to boss me about, but only to watch me and see my inner processes not from within those processes, as we usually do, but from without. Seen from within, that irritation produced by the sound of whistling appears as Righteous Indignation: 'I'm working; how dare that young rascal interfere with my work! I've told him not to whistle, and I'm not going to have my authority challenged.' Whereas, seen from the outside, through the eyes of the double, the psychological picture is quite different: 'Here is a grown-up man, a would-be thinker who lets his highly-organised mechanism be upset by a few sharp notes. By all means tell the boy to stop that nasty noise, but why get upset?'

"Let's take a bigger instance—such as financial worry in my case. As you know, I'm most of the time on the brink of bankruptcy; so whenever the telephone bill arrives or Nadya mentions a new expense I hasten to pull the elastic: I know what is coming. The elastic usually shows a strong resistance, for that particular worry is a serious one and has the force of a ten-year old habit behind it. My double looks at me and sees the familiar despondency well up in me: self-pity, anger, weariness. But he doesn't see clearly, for he himself is to some extent enmeshed in my trouble. So I pull the elastic harder, until I am well in the focus of his look and my despondency appears to him as something alien, as though it weren't mine, but somebody else's. When that has happened—though it doesn't always happen—my point of view changes: my worry appears to me not as a real drama, but as a picture drawn up by my imagination. The fact

that I have only twenty-nine pounds at the bank and no prospect of getting more is, of course, unpleasant and may mean trouble in the future; but it doesn't affect the present. I've been in this situation before, and I'm still alive and kicking briskly, more briskly than when I had some money; so why should I, or rather that glum fellow in the arm-chair two yards in front of me, waste his vitality by brooding over what is a mere possibility, and not a fact? By all means let him try and earn some money, but fretting won't help. On the contrary, since moods seem to attract congenial events out of the air so to speak, his indulgence in gloom is merely conjuring up new difficulties. . . . That, as you'll notice, is the standard common-sense reasoning with which people usually fight their negative emotions. But as a weapon it's no good at all, for reason will never subdue emotion; that can only be done by your *seeing* the emotion in you and tracing its origin to imagination or whatever its source may be. When you have done that, you are half-way to winning your little fight, and it's only then that reasoning should come in and fix the experience in the intellect with a view to forming a positive, conscious habit.

"At first—for a month or so—the only result I achieved by dissociation was the change of view-point. That was not much, and I went on practising. I would summon the double in all sorts of disorganising states, when I felt depressed, excited, apathetic or angry. He would see the emotion well up in me, reach its maximum, subside and die down, leaving a residue of dissatisfaction; that would dissolve with time, and I was what I had been before—minus so many units of energy which had been consumed in inner friction. I repeated the experiment again and again, summoning the double five, ten and twenty times a day, with varying success. Nothing happened, and I

began to wonder whether I was engaged on a fool's errand; I thought of dropping the whole business. And then one day the first change occurred. I was going out to call on somebody, and in the hall I was stopped by my wife, who very emotionally insisted on my putting on another suit, since the one I had on was indecently shabby. Being in a hurry I said I couldn't be bothered. She said I must, and my self-willed Ego was about to flare up for the hundred and first time in defence of my 'freedom,' when I remembered to dissociate and pulled the elastic. The eye of my double caught the wave of anger just as it started rising. But instead of continuing to rise, as always before, it quivered for a moment, then slowly subsided and flattened out, leaving an unruffled surface. The effect on me was that of a minor miracle: I had witnessed the direct transformation of contemplative thought into action.

"I had further successes after that. I found I could shout 'Stop whistling!' to my boy without getting irritated; calm my excitement when talking to my publisher or tackling a new chapter of my book; prevent my thoughts from wandering; stop feeling annoyed with people. At first these successes were rare and scattered capriciously like the hits of a bad shot. Gradually, with practice, they became more frequent, and I was able to form an idea of what I could do and what I could not. By now, in the fourth year of training, I know that I can cope fairly well with most non-physical troubles which affect mainly myself: all sorts of irritations, depressions and annoyances, including the biggest of them, financial worry; if things of the mind could be measured in figures, I would say I've managed to reduce the intensity of my financial worry to one quarter or even less. I don't think I can do much with strong physical pain—for the body

is much more unruly than intellect or emotion; and so far I haven't been able to get at the sex in me at all; which means that I can't get my double at that particular point at which I am exactly in his focus. Because sex comes in, my habit of worrying about Nadya possesses an enormous resistance, and it's only lately that I have begun to make some headway against it. On the whole, nothing to boast of; and yet it's a lot. For in spite of the fact that our life in London continues to be about as hard as ever, I feel infinitely happier now than I did say four years ago. I feel a different man; I know I have ceased to be stationary and am progressing as I wanted to progress. I have at last begun to *change*.

"One more example to show how the method works. One day a friend of mine treated me in a very inconsiderate way. I was hurt; the emotions of self-pity and indignation were aroused in me and bitter thoughts came in their wake. 'You squander your affection,' they said, 'you always get less from people than what you give them. That fellow in particular can't care much for you if he treats you as he did. You should teach him a lesson. Write to him pointing out how and why he went wrong, rub it in well. . . .' And so on; I had gone half-way home, writing caustic letters and making a penetrating analysis of the man's character, before it occurred to me to summon the double. He at once made me shift my attention from my friend to myself, to the disorder in my Great Body: quantities of energy burned up in futile indignation—futile because it had no outlet for the moment—and in equally futile imagination—for, anyhow, I wouldn't write any letters and there was no need for me to rehearse what I might say to him. Moreover, as I watched myself through the eyes of my double I realised that the emotions and thoughts which caused the un-

pleasant disturbance in me were fictitious, unreal. My self-pity was unreal: for I had suffered no loss, I was exactly what I had been before. My grudge was unreal: for firstly, my friend was no less considerate to-day than he had always been, and secondly, even if he were, that was his business, and not mine. The reality behind that self-made disturbance in me was an unpleasant shock to my habitual conception of behaviour, plus a minor disarrangement of my plans; and the real problem was a practical one: how to avoid a repetition of such shocks in the future. That was all; the rest—the unpleasant strain in me—was just automatic activity of intellect and emotion, started by imagination and quite senseless: I might as well begin to rage against Lenin for having confiscated the fur coat which I had left in Russia. . . . And because I *saw* the mechanism of my grudge it was not merely put to sleep, as I might have achieved with the help of will, but killed.

“You may ask: What has all this to do with morality? Nothing—and a lot. Nothing, because I don’t believe in universally valid moral codes prescribing the same Good and Evil for everybody; and a lot, because I’m building up my own morality, based not on any abstractions, but on the concrete qualities of my own self. I have been given a wonderful apparatus, the triune Great Body which, as some people have demonstrated, possesses an unlimited capacity for creation. But, like most, I have been badly neglecting my Great Body, and it has been working very inefficiently, with a lot of useless friction, which caused much unpleasantness and pain to me and other people. My duty—my moral duty—is to put this apparatus in proper order and co-ordinate the activity of its parts in such a way as to do more of what I want to do, and do it better. In so far as I succeed in that I shall

produce Good, the only good *I* am capable of: thoughts which *I* think are true and helpful to others; emotions which give me pleasure and can be shared with others; relationships which satisfy me and make richer my partners and myself. Conversely, in so far as I neglect my Great Body and through laziness let my emotions or my thoughts or my instincts run away with me, I increase my automatism, I waste my energy in negative emotions, I produce evil.

“The double I’m cultivating in me is the embryo of the man I want to be, a man free from conflicts and habits, conscious of all he is doing and therefore doing only what the whole of him approves of. At the moment that new man in me is undeveloped: he knows very little about the Great Body in which he resides and his control over it is proportionately weak. But I help him to grow by increasing his knowledge of me, and as he grows the range of his control widens until in the end—the ideal end which I may never reach—he will take charge of my whole life and make it conscious all through. Then and only then shall I evolve a Will in the true sense of the word, one Will to replace the three different wills which at present serve my physical, emotional and intellectual systems and pull me now one way now another, according to which of them happens to be the strongest at the moment.

“Consciousness is a force, the strongest and most ‘real’ force there is. If you want to split a rock you use dynamite. If you want a few men to perform a certain action you use will-power. But when it’s a question of changing a multitude of lives permanently, or at least for a very long time, that can only be achieved by consciousness. Buddha’s and Christ’s ideas have changed the life of two continents for two thousand years. And

history is full of examples showing the terrific power of consciousness, even if it works in blinkers and is focused on one aspect of human life—the church, the nation, some particular social regime—ignoring and sometimes destroying the triune harmony between the physical body, emotion and intellect.

“Consciousness is also an aim, the aim of organic evolution. From the amœba which passively wants, to the monkey which wants and wills, evolution goes up to man, who begins to know what he wants and wills. His knowledge is very incomplete: most of his inner life passes in the dark, outside his field of vision, and, being unconscious of it, he cannot control it. That is his monkey life, the chaos of automatic habits, imaginary desires, combativeness, depression and fear. Only when the whole of him, his Great Body, is lit and penetrated by consciousness, will he be what nature meant him to be: a Man.

“Continuing the line of evolution to its ideal limit, we may conceive God as a consciousness which has infinity for its radius and is so intense as to be identical with will, action and matter. The universe is but a thought of God. But as we cannot imagine a thought which hurls hosts of constellations across the ether and assumes this wonderful blue colour above us and is as hard and hot as this earth under our feet, we had better not speculate about it.”

The Chief Engineer of Cecil's company called one evening. Lydia knitted—almost as fast as Nadya, who is a champion; the two men sipped whisky, and I questioned them about the social problems of Mexico. They were

both intelligent, clear-headed men free from all political or national bias; they got on swimmingly with the Mexicans and knew them very well, having worked in the country for thirteen years. As Mexico had been hospitable to them, they felt in duty bound to stand up for the country, and when I said something disparaging *à propos* of Mexican Socialism they turned on me.

"It's easy to pick holes in their Socialism," they said, "but you must see it in its proper perspective. Look at what Mexico has done in the last ten years. They have a network of excellent roads; and before that there were no roads to speak of. They have an army which is an army and not rabble, as before. They have put an end to banditry. They have thousands of schools; no country in the world spends proportionately as much on education as Mexico does: half their budget. They have broken the back of the land-owning class, which—there is no doubt about that—had been ruthlessly exploiting the Indios. So long as the landed gentry tried to resist there was fighting; but it stopped the moment they capitulated, and now a marquess has exactly the same rights and opportunities as a half-caste, not on paper only, but in fact. Which is more than Russia can show, eh? And mind you, this is a beggarly country, one in which civilisation stops within ten miles of the town and three-quarters of the population are savages. No, it isn't a bad achievement.

"At present they are waging war against big capital, which over here means foreign capital. The enemy is a formidable one, so they feel diffident about a frontal attack—they don't want any international complications if they can avoid them—and harass him on the flanks, by raising the rate of wages time after time. The workmen demand a rise of twenty per cent let's say; they get it and

a new contract is signed for a year. A month later they demand another twenty per cent. If you show them the contract they say it's not valid because—this is their usual formula—the circumstances have changed. The dispute is referred to the Junta—a kind of Court—and as the Junta is really a labour organisation, it always finds in favour of the workmen. So the Junta awards them the second twenty per cent and another contract is signed for a year. Three months later they strike for yet another twenty per cent, and again the Junta finds in their favour. And so it goes on. The employer must keep every letter of the contract; the workmen can repudiate it whenever they like. If the employer applies to a Minister or the President they'll promise him anything—they are too polite to refuse—but their promise isn't binding, and they have no intention of fulfilling it.

“The populace helps the Government to make the position of the foreign capitalist untenable. Take ore for instance. We had a strong wooden fence round the place where the ore is kept—the thieves sawed their way through it. We put down concrete posts—they dug tunnels under the posts. Now we have concrete walls sunk so deep that no one can get under them—so they blow them up with dynamite. We know and everybody knows who the thieves are, we've caught them red-handed time after time, but it's no use: the judge won't prosecute them and the police release them. Last year the thieves wounded one of our guards, and as he was a Mexican we thought that this time the authorities would be on our side. No such luck: all the police said was: Why did the fool interfere? We, on the other hand, daren't arm our guards, for if they shot a thief that would be foul murder and we, the bosses, would be put in prison. So it's a question of pitting our wits against theirs: a sort of sport. . . .

Mexico for the Mexicans, they say. And after all, why not? That's what everybody says in Europe and in the States and all over the world.

"Yes, their attitude to property is rather loose. Have you heard about the *diablitos*? They are contraptions enabling the tenant to use electricity in such a way that its consumption isn't registered on the meter. There are more than a hundred varieties of these *diablitos* in circulation; the most ingenious of them make the finger of the meter go back, so that instead of consuming energy the tenant appears to produce it. The inventor of a particularly popular *diablito* tried to patent his invention and was very hurt when the Patent Office rejected his application.

"Nothing can be done about the *diablitos*, for there is no law against the theft of the electric current. Every year the question is revived: the newspapers print long articles for and against, a Bill is prepared and turned down on the grounds that (a) electricity is intangible and therefore can't be stolen, and (b) electricity is an article of prime necessity and therefore its theft should not be punished."

Said the Chief Engineer:

"One day I was driving along the Reforma, when a car came out from a side street and bumped into mine. Although the damage was not serious, the case was taken to court. Several witnesses, including a policeman, showed that the other fellow was in the wrong as he had crossed against the light signal. The judge never disputed that. He asked me what I was, and when I told him, he said: 'You're the richer of the two, so you have to pay.'"

"Have there been cases," I asked, "of industrial undertakings taken over by the workmen or the Government?"

(Our conversation took place a month before the requisitioning of the oilfields.)

The answer was not enlightening. Yes, there had been a few cases, but my informants only knew of one, a little cement factory which had passed to the workmen some two years ago. In the first year the new management spent all the reserve capital, incurred a substantial debt, and obtained a subsidy from the Government. In the second year they suspended payment of interest on their debt, spent the subsidy, and asked for another one. As that was slow in coming they sold a piece of land—which incidentally belonged to a foreign concern—and used the proceeds to raise their own wages. The foreign company thought of suing them, but did not: it stood no earthly chance of winning.

My next question was: Has Mexico on balance gained or lost through the introduction of Socialism? Once more, as was to be expected, I received an unsatisfactory answer:

“No one can say. The workmen’s standard of life has risen enormously, it’s now on the level of the British workman’s and sometimes higher. But the peasant isn’t better off, he has neither more money nor more political influence. Before Socialism, Mexico exported maize and wheat, and now it imports them. When they requisition the oilfields things will be worse still, for they have a genius for mismanaging big business. On the whole, speaking in terms of money and material welfare, Socialism so far has made the country poorer, if anything. But then one has to take into account the other items of national welfare, such as good roads, the rapid spread of education, the political development of the masses—three things which may bring material fruit in the future.”

"Still," I persisted, "can one say that the setback in material welfare is outweighed by the cultural impetus of Socialism?"

The engineer muttered: "*Quien sabe?*" Cecil got up, took a book from the shelf and read out:

" 'We are wrong in thinking that this country is eager for regeneration. Everybody makes a great noise about it, but actually they love chaos because it is old and ugly, so old that it has become a national institution with them.'

"This," he explained, "was written seventy years ago by Carlotta, the wife of Emperor Maximilian. Sometimes I think she's right. They change their Presidents and their laws and the names of their streets, but the chaos remains the same as ever."

"It's been getting worse these last two years or so," remarked the Chief Engineer.

"It has, I'm afraid," agreed Cecil listlessly.

All of a sudden he looked tired and older than his years. He glanced at the book he was holding, put it aside with a frown and turned to the engineer:

"Have another drink. You know, this stuff is much better than what I used to get through the Club. . . ."

They talked club and whisky, and I wondered why the two progressive social systems—Socialism and Communism—should be given a try-out just in the two most chaotic countries in the world: Mexico and Russia. Was it to show the other nations how not to do it and what mistakes to avoid? And would the other nations profit by the lesson? Hardly so. For a nation in love with a new idea is swamped by emotion like a lovelorn youth in the throes of first love. The *historia morbi* is the same in both cases: elation with rainbows and speechifying; elation and perplexity; perplexity and irritation; nervous

jerking and despondency; disillusionment, pain and apathy, with a dim hope that Next Time it will be better. And so it will go on and on for another thousand or five thousand years, until the nations grow up to the level of an adult individual. . . .

The morning sun on the veranda. The faint outlines of the two volcanoes slowly emerge from the white haze. Bang-Ho and his acolytes stare as though hypnotised at the blinding white wall on which two fat green lizards are performing Müller's exercise Number Eleven: Lie face downwards and, keeping your body rigid, lift and lower yourself on your arms. Neither Lydia nor I can imagine what they do it for. Slimming? Military drill? Art for art's sake?

Beyond the road in the yellow desert half a dozen cows are frolicking. Of all Mexican animals, man not excluded, cows are by far the liveliest. They gallop about holding their tails higher than their European sisters could ever manage; sometimes they stop to stare in the approved fashion of cows and Indios, then they gallop off again.

"Do they do it because they can find no grass?" I ask Lydia.

"I don't know. . . . They are Señor Varga's cows. Varga is one of the ex-Presidents of Mexico."

I watch the cows with an increased interest. I am not a snob, yet the fact that they belong to a Big Man makes them somehow different in my eyes from what they were before: more interesting. Intellectual habit, induced no doubt by the eight years of my bureaucratic service in Russia.

"Mary used to know this Señor Varga," continues Lydia. "But she cuts him now."

"Why?"

"She says he's a miser, and she despises misers. What happened was this. He came here one day and stood on the road opposite our house watching the cows. Mary was there too. She asked him whose cows they were, and he said: "Mine." They talked about the cows and then he took her to his house—it's not far from here, farther up the Sevilla—and showed her his tortoises, he has some huge ones. His house is full of beautiful things, so Mary decided he must be rich, and asked him whether he liked scent. He said he did, whereupon she came home, and together with *Chérie à la gorge percée* prepared some scent. They took a beer bottle, poured water in, stuffed some flowers into the water and let them brew for a few days. Then Mary took the bottle to Señor Varga. Chérie's idea was that she should ask twenty pesos for it, but Mary thought ten cents would do. But it never came to fixing a price because Varga, after having smelt the bottle, gave it back to Mary and said he must go. That's why she thinks him a miser."

On the ground, leaning against the apricot tree, Jim is sitting, hard at work, studying Mexican Civics. I know the manual, for I heard him the day before on "The Aims of Socialism," a floridly written chapter full of high-sounding words like *Justicia*, *Cooperacion*, *Humanidad*, *Organisacion* (Jim was particularly good on *Organisacion*). Just now he is at the chapter "Socialism and Communism," which he is learning by heart since neither he nor I could make head or tail of its involved thirty-inch-long Spanish periods; and when Jim asked my own opinion of the difference between Socialism and Communism, I could only say that there were nine thousand

differences, as many as there were books on the subject.

In the middle of the lawn Xenia is lying on her tummy drumming her feet on the ground, reading an American detective story and humming the Mexican song of the year:

*A Atotonilco voy a caminar.
U yu yu yu, U yu yu yu,*

the second line representing the clatter of the train as it rolls along towards the filthy little place called Atotonilco. Xenia's singing, although very musical indeed, gets on Jim's nerves.

"For heaven's sake stahpl!" he groans. "Why must you always be here when I'm studying?"

"I like that!" The emotion of Righteous Indignation acting on Xenia's muscular system makes her sit up. "I was here fihrrst, so if you want to learn you can go somewhere else."

"I don't want to go anywhere else, I want to stay here."

"All right then, be here, I don't mind." And, turning down on her tummy again, she intones louder than ever, on a note of defiance:

"Parecen las muchachas angelitos de Dios."

A particularly restrained, "Xenia, stop, please," comes from Lydia.

The girl sits up once more, the mechanism of indignation is turning at full speed. Her mouth is awry, her eyebrows are working up and down, she blinks fast.

"But, Motherr, why?" she cries nervously. "I came here firrst, so . . ."

"Xenia," admonishes her mother. "Will you kindly . . ."

"I'm not going to stahp!" the girl cries on a high hysterical note. "He only wants to annoy me. . . . Oh, you are a beast!" she shouts furiously at Jim.

"That's enough. Now go," says Lydia in a different dry tone.

"But, Motherr, why?" whines the girl. (Note the automatism of the repetition.)

"Because I tell you to."

The girl rises reluctantly and strolls off, her long arms dangling wearily.

"She never does anything I ahsk her," remarks Jim, with bitterness. "I ahsked her to lend me her rohller-skates. . . ."

"You're supposed to be working, aren't you?" Lydia reminds him.

"All right, all right."

But he has no luck with Mexican Civics that day. First, a *charro* on a magnificent horse comes prancing past the house, and Jim, of course, must comment on both. Then a beggar stops at the gate and has to be directed to the kitchen. Then the turkey—Cook's present to Cecil—starts scratching in the middle of a flower-bed, and Jim is detailed to chase it away. "Perhaps I'd better go to my room," he remarks irresolutely, and waits, hoping that the two grown-ups will eagerly object to his leaving them. They do not; they maintain an expectant silence, and he strolls away with the heavy swaying gait of a he-man.

"What's the matter with the poor thing?" I ask, pointing at the turkey, which in the meantime had returned to the garden and is making its way towards the forbidden flower-bed. "Look how pale it is."

All the blood has gone out of its crest and the dangling wattles under its neck; they have taken on a sinister blue colour. The behaviour of the turkey is strange, too: it

ruffles its feathers and rushes about restlessly, aimlessly, emitting raucous cries of anguish.

"Yes, I noticed it was like that yesterday," says Lydia, with apprehension. "I think it's going to die."

"Have it killed before it dies."

"No, Mary will be heart-broken. The turkey is her special pet."

Just then Mary steps out of the house. She, too, notices the ominous change in the bird, and although she tries to hide her emotion, pity shines in her eyes.

"I'm afraid, darling, our turkey is going to die," says Lydia.

Mary reflects for a while with concentration, and the outcome of her reflection is the question: "What does Antonia say?"

A sensible question this, for Antonia is indisputably an expert in poultry matters. For some reason Lydia had omitted to consult her.

"Yes, that's a good idea," she says. "Go and ask Antonia what she thinks about it."

Mary runs into the kitchen and is back in a few moments. Her face tells us that the news she has brought is good.

"Antonia says," she reports hurriedly, having taken in enough air for a long sentence, "that it's quite all right, and we needn't kill it because it only wants a husband and is miserable because it can't get one."

Lydia and I glance at each other and burst into laughter. We laugh for a long time. Mary watches us first in bewilderment, then with disapproval: how can we make merry over an unhappy bird? To bring our heartlessness home to us she fills a basin with water from the garden tap and takes it to the turkey. But instead of drinking, the turkey clucks piteously and runs away in

sudden panic. "Stupid!" says Mary contemptuously, and pours the water out on to the ground. Lydia and I dry our tears.

Now Xenia appears, a transformed, very pretty Xenia radiant with happiness and excitement. That is because she has remembered that she is going to a dance to-morrow. In her hands she is holding a pink dress.

"Motherr, there is a stain here," she says, showing the dress to Lydia. "'Can you do anything about it?'"

Lydia inspects the stain and sends her to fetch some benzine and cotton-wool. She rubs the soiled spot and lets it dry for a minute in the hot sun. The spot disappears.

"Oh, thank you, Motherr!" Xenia cries exuberantly, taking the dress and looking at it with sparkling affection in her eyes. Then with angular, youthful grace she flings her arms round Lydia's neck, kisses her and runs away on her thin, long legs.

I follow her with my eyes and feel sad because I remember that to-morrow night I shall leave for a Southern Mexican port where I have to catch an oil-tanker. I do not want to think about going, so I ask Lydia whether she is in a mood to listen to a confession.

"I'm always in a mood for that, I adore confessions," she says, smiling. "But let's go into the park, otherwise the children will interrupt us the whole time."

"I want to tell you about my amorous peccadilloes," I began when we were in the park. "They are very mild, but you may find them interesting because self-detachment plays a certain part in them."

"Last June Vincent took me for a trip to the French Alps. We spent a fortnight there, after which I left him

and went hiking all by myself to the province of Aosta, on the Italian side of Mont Blanc. I promptly fell in love with people—the carabinieri, the peasants and the workmen—and with the country. The snowline had risen halfway up the mountains, and they looked their glorious best. You know that I have a passion for high mountains, a feeling of almost religious intensity, and I lived in a state of permanent ecstasy. I would walk with my head thrown back, looking at the glittering white heights, muttering “*Gospodi, Gospodi*” (my God), and occasionally crying with happiness. In bed, before falling asleep, I would go over and over the same places in imagination, and shake with joy. I was told the Freudians interpret this particular form of craziness as a sublimation of the Mother Fixation. Let them. . . .

“On the eve of my departure I called at an inn situated right at the foot of a glacier. The inn was just about to be opened, nevertheless the *padrona* gave me a cup of coffee and had one with me. She was half French—they all are in that district—a good-looking and charming woman. I felt drunk with the beauty of the scenery, and we talked like two old friends. She took me to the glacier, and we stood there gazing at the *aiguilles*—they are wonderful, these *aiguilles* of Mont Blanc! Suddenly she cried: “*Ah mon Dieu*, I’m sure she’s waiting for me!” Meaning the new maid she had engaged to make the place ready for the season. She ran to the house, and I went back to my pub, which was five miles away.

“Sleep wouldn’t come to me that night: the *padrona* was calling me. I thought of her deep flexible voice, her spontaneous graceful gestures, the quick change of light and shade in her eyes, and my fingers tingled remembering the pressure of her hand, a pressure soft and firm. And there was that in her look which said that she liked

me. What if I called on her to-morrow? To-morrow I might call in the afternoon, and the day after. . . .

"The trouble was that my return ticket was about to expire, so that if I didn't leave on the morning of the next day I would lose some eight pounds. Which I hadn't got with me, and which in any case I hadn't the right to waste. That was clear. But it was equally clear that I longed to be with the *padrona*. And, damn it all, why shouldn't I for once spend a few pounds on myself, I who for years and years had been denying myself everything above a ninepenny seat in the cinema? Eight pounds, only eight pounds—and a wonderful, unique combination of beauty: the sun, the *aiguilles*, and the woman!

"I had been tossing about in bed for hours before I remembered to summon my double. Seen through his eyes, the picture of my inner state appeared different from what I imagined it to be. I saw that my intellect was dead against the idea of staying: either the lady rejected my advances, in which case all I would get for my eight pounds was a humiliating sense of frustration; or, if she were nice to me, I in my present state of exaltation would lose my head and find myself in a mess. The physical pull, I realised, was not so strong as I had thought: I would certainly not become miserable if I gave her up. As for the emotional longing that was to a large extent imaginary: the sexual impulse had switched on the mechanism of imagination which in turn had set going the machinery of romantic feelings. . . . The outcome of it was that I fell sound asleep, and the next morning was off for St. Bernard, on the way home.

"The second episode began two years ago with a call I paid to some friends of mine in Surrey. As I was coming up their drive I saw a woman standing on the veranda and rummaging in her bag. On hearing my footsteps she

lifted her head, and in the same second I experienced something quite unfamiliar to me, a sort of sexual shock as quick as an electric discharge and not unlike it in nature. I was puzzled, the more so as the next moment I noticed that the woman had not one attractive feature: she was far too plump and stocky to my taste, and I didn't like her eyes or their expression.

"There was an awkward pause, then we introduced ourselves. 'By the way, I've read *Its Silly Face*,' she said, 'and I thought it was simply wonderful.' The gushing way in which she said that seemed to me vulgar; I grinned stupidly, as I always do when I hear a compliment, muttered some words of thanks, and went into the house.

"A week later I met her quite by chance in Trafalgar Square. We both happened to be going in the same direction, and for a while we walked together. What was I doing just now? she asked, and when I said I was going home: 'Do have tea with me, oh, please do!' That 'please' of hers was so ingenuous that I hadn't the heart to refuse. We had tea and talked. It was really she who did the talking: she was in a confessional mood and told me a lot about herself and her married life, which was rather unhappy. She had a queer, grotesque mind, quick and inconsequential, and as she spoke without full stops, I found it at times difficult to follow her. She interested me—I hadn't often come across that type—but I didn't find her likeable. Too self-absorbed, too chaotic and no depth, was my estimate. Not good-looking either.

"Two years passed, and one day—that was last July—she rang me up. She had read all my books in the meantime. 'I liked them terribly,' she said, 'and what do you yourself think of them? But no, you're far too modest to say what you think of your own stuff, and, anyhow, I don't want to discuss books with you, because it's waste

of time; but you'll see me one of these days, will you? Please do.'

"A week later we met at a café. Then we met again and walked about Wimbledon Common. Many things had happened to her in the last two years. She had run away from her husband, had loved a man and unloved him, then there had been some dramatic developments and she had nearly died, but—'Oh, that doesn't matter really, either you can stand things or you can't and they break you, but as you see, I'm not broken, am I?' She certainly was not, she had slimmed down, looked younger, more alive and much more attractive than before. She was frankly out to attract me—in a primitive way—and she succeeded. One evening—it was a romantic evening, warm and with a full moon—we were walking on the Common and I stopped. She asked me why, and I said: 'It's my legs, they refuse to move.' They had indeed grown as heavy as lead. 'Oh, what's the matter?' she cried in alarm, and then I laughed: 'It's only that I want terribly to kiss you,' I said. Which I did there and then, and after a minute or so it became clear what we both wanted: that curious shock I had received at the sight of her on the veranda was telling now—after two years! (It's the body that has the gift of clairvoyance and fortune-reading, not the intellect or emotion.) It was agreed that we would meet on Thursday, since she was free for the second half of the week, and, as my wife was just leaving for a week, I should be free too.

"Wednesday was a difficult day. Desire made me restless; my work—I was going through the last draft of my gypsy novel—proceeded slowly. I had to pull the elastic very hard before my double could see me. He saw that the attraction which the lady exercised on me was purely physical: neither intellect nor emotion were involved.

Now, I am not promiscuous and never was; the prospect of a half-hearted affair didn't appeal to me in the least, and what was more, I was quite sure that I could easily resist my desire if I wanted to. The odd thing was that I didn't want to resist: I felt that this time I must give in to my desire, that it was the right thing for me to do, that it would be good for me. Why so, I didn't understand at the time, but I knew that whatever happened on Thursday I wouldn't lose my head and wouldn't get into a mess. The lady? Oh well, she was not a baby, let her think for herself. My wife? She would never know, that was easily seen to.

"Thursday came, and the morning post brought me a letter from the lady, two pages almost illegible through hurry and temperamental annoyance. Our plans had fallen through. Her sister, who lived at Margate, had suddenly fallen ill, and she, the writer, had to rush over to take charge of the children and the household. It would take days and days to settle things, and—'and we must meet as soon as all this bother is over, please let's.'

"A few years ago a hitch of that nature and at that point would have made me go through some violent contortions and feel very nasty for many days. Now I chuckled as I read the note. For at the first intimation of something having gone wrong I had pulled the elastic and got outside the angry irritation which began to stir in my frustrated body; and, seen from outside, that irritation appeared to me comic and silly. I put the letter down with a feeling of relief. Everything had happened in the best possible way. I had taken a risk and won. I was spared a cheap affair and had demonstrated to myself that I had grown since the days of Miriam and could stand sexual disappointment without turning a hair: for once I had proved to be master of myself. And that was

just why I had embarked upon this affair. My everyday life, like everybody else's, is rather monotonous in the sense that the difficulties on which I have to train myself are always the same: worries financial, domestic and literary. Now, as in tennis one gets stale playing always with the same partner, so I was getting stale in my work on myself, and I had to try my hand at some new unfamiliar conflict in order to see what progress I had made. . . . Well, and that is the end of the story. I haven't seen the lady since. Why are you smiling?"

Lydia chuckled.

"How funny," she said.

"What's funny?"

"You, of course. You are becoming *un vrai coureur de femmes*."

"Wait till I am sixty-five, I'll be a real Don Juan then. It's my books that bring about the temptations. Through them I get to know new people, and some of them happen to be impressed by my writings, so that they are in advance disposed to be interested in me as a person. Self-detachment, too, has something to do with it: ever since I've been practising it I've felt more alive and freer—younger, in fact—than I'd ever felt before. And don't tell me that is bad, because we both know that it isn't."

"I wasn't going to say anything of the kind. Not if you are sure it's right for you."

"I am sure of that. I do not admit that there are things which are always bad, bad for everybody. I think everyone has to find his own distinction between good and bad; and he can't find it through meditation only, he must also live, that is to say get new experience and new knocks on the head; and the more knocks he gets, the more painful they are, the more he can learn by studying his

reactions. That is my Credo, has been for four years, and since it's my Credo I have to live up to it, haven't I? Which I am doing."

"A restless Credo," said Lydia, shaking her head. "No, I'm not arguing with you. Since it suits your nature you must stick to it. . . . Is your heart unengaged at the moment? Apart from Nadya, of course, whom I assume you love?"

"I do, just as much as ever. . . . As to your first question, I don't know what to say. Oh, she's wonderful. She is . . ."

"Hadn't you better start from the beginning?"

"All right. You see, it was like this. One day I received a fan letter, an ordinary fan letter, nice, sincere and artless: on the whole not interesting. What struck me about it was the handwriting. It was of a very unusual type, the same as yours: all spiders and beetles, with legs and without. So I did what I'd never done before: I rang her up and asked whether I could come to tea one day. She said Yes, and I came. I felt sure she would be nice, but as a matter of fact, she was much more than that, she was ravishing. Very young—twenty-five, I think, although she looks less—with lovely eyes, eyelashes an inch long, very straight black hair which made me think of the women of Aosta, and that Madonna oval of the face which exists only in Italy: her mother was Italian. Well, her handwriting was revelatory indeed, for she does have a lot in common with you as you were in Petersburg: the same reserve, the same searching mind, the same attention in her look. She talks as little as you did then, but she understands everything: instinctive intelligence. I can talk to her as freely as I talk with you. Oh, she's marvellous!"

"I'm sure she is. . . . Is she married?"

"She's a widow. Her husband was killed two years ago in a motor-car accident, right before her eyes. That's why her teeth often ache."

"Her teeth?"

"Yes. She keeps them set very hard for hours on end. Automatic strain, which dates back to the moment of the accident: she must have set her teeth then to suppress her emotion, and that was how the habit started."

"Have you known her long?"

"No, I only had tea with her that day, that's all."

Lydia burst into uncontrollable laughter. She laughed and laughed and could not stop. Tears came to her eyes; she wiped them and laughed again.

"Oh, heavens!" she groaned when she had calmed down. "I haven't laughed like that for years. You are a funny man!"

Then, growing serious:

"Are you going to see her when you get back? No, I needn't have asked that: of course you are. But do you realise that it's dangerous?"

"So much the better! I told you about my Credo; I have no right to run away from myself."

"I understand that. But I take it you don't want a repetition of that Miriam business, do you?"

"No, and it won't be repeated. I know that whatever happens I won't lose my head and I won't hurt Nadya this time. I'll only do what my Great Body approves."

"Tut-tut-tut, we are ambitious, aren't we?"

"I am. But then I rely on my double; he won't let me down. And if in spite of him I lose my head and get into a mess, serve me right. Three years of training ought to have taught me something, and if they haven't, I'm no good for anything, anyway. As for my being a born bigamist, that, I'm afraid, is a fact I can't alter."

"You are talking nonsense now," said Lydia, and there was an almost shocked expression in the look she gave me. I say Almost because nothing in me can really shock her: she understands me too well for that.

"I'm not talking nonsense," I retorted. "It is my nature. In Petersburg I was in love with you and Katya without experiencing any conflict; then in England it was Nadya and Miriam. I'm sure many men are made like that—I'm not sure about women—but either they are afraid to acknowledge that or they don't know it themselves because they had no opportunity of finding it out. I don't think they are worse than the rest. More . . . more uncomfortable perhaps."

"Much more uncomfortable, if you ask me," said Lydia with feeling, but there was laughter in her eyes. "Well, I can only hope you won't get into trouble this time."

"I know I won't. . . . By the way, you never told me what you thought of self-detachment."

She lit a cigarette and smoked for a while in silence. Presently she said, answering her own thoughts rather than my question, and there was a note of sadness in her voice as she said it:

"I'm afraid people don't want to change. I often try to believe they do, but that's an illusion, they only think they do. And there we are, exactly where we were a hundred and a thousand years ago: the same wars and revolutions and oppression and ignorance. *Plus ça change*. . . . Oh, let's go, it's about tea-time."

My question was answered clearly enough, I thought.

We crossed the waste land, reached the park, crossed the ravine, all this without saying one word. It was our

last walk: I was leaving that evening for Coatzacoalcos in the South.

"Well?" said Lydia at length.

"Well?"

We often found it difficult to start conversation. Talking is a means of knowing each other, and we did know each other.

"I have a feeling we'll meet once more," she said. "Now that you've managed to come over here nothing seems impossible. . . . Let's stop here, and give me one of your cigarettes. I must say it's the horriddest brand I've ever smoked."

"And the cheapest."

We sat down on a boulder and smoked.

"I'm afraid I'm getting self-contented and placid in Mexico," said Lydia after a pause. "Am I, do you think?"

"Not you. There is a constant self-criticism in you, a constant watching of yourself. I hear you ask yourself the whole time: What am I doing just now? why am I doing it? That certainly is not self-contentment."

"But I live so quietly here."

"Why shouldn't you? You've built your life, it's safe and steady. . . ."

"Mexico permitting."

"Yes, Mexico permitting. Should more troubles come, you'll deal with them as effectively as you've done in the past. At present there are none, so why not enjoy peace? You have Cecil plus five children plus your brother plus your mother to think of—it's a whole-time job."

Then we spoke of age and death. Age, we agreed, had no meaning except on passports.

"I know I'm not the same as twenty years ago," I said. "I hate jumping ditches, and the thought of a picnic doesn't send a thrill through my bones. But I don't miss

that thrill: I have other sensations which I haven't had before, and they give me more satisfaction than any thrills. I enjoyed Mont Blanc this summer more than I had enjoyed the Pyrenees twelve years ago, although I couldn't walk as much. Or rather because of that; for instead of straining my muscles to the uttermost until I became quite *avachi*, I would sit down whenever I began to feel tired, and look. With the result that I did fewer miles and saw more. And I enjoyed your company more this time, with a fuller enjoyment than ever I did in Russia. My life is getting less and less eventful"—a sceptical "Ahem!" from Lydia—"but I don't regret that, because my inner life is more conscious and therefore richer. . . . Are you afraid of growing old?"

"Not at all. On the contrary, I like the idea. I'm looking forward to the time when I'm sixty and white-haired, because I know I shall be wiser then and more . . . more conscious to use your word. Also more useful to others. I can't understand why most people hate the thought of ageing—apart from illness, I mean."

"Lack of imagination. They are like a child with its dolls. The child loves them and takes it for granted that it'll go on loving and needing them for ever. It simply can't imagine that a time will come when it won't want to look at any dolls."

"Yes, that must be it. . . . And death? Are you afraid of death?"

"No. And I never was. Death, I think, is a terribly bright flash which frightens the organism as a flash of magnesium frightens the eye. And since after that flash we cease to exist, at least with our present consciousness. . . ."

"How do you know that?"

"Correction accepted with thanks. All right then, we

must admit that anything may happen after death. But since we have no idea of what it will be, we needn't think about it. And, anyhow, the new existence, if any, can't be worse than what this life sometimes is. . . . Does death frighten you? No, of course it doesn't."

"It doesn't. I only hope I'll die without too much pain because . . . but you mustn't laugh."

"I won't."

"Because I want to die like a lady."

Something in her, perhaps the slightly confused expression which came to her face as she uttered these words, made her look strangely young and girlish, as she had been in Petersburg. How little power, I thought, time has over the human soul!

"Have you finished packing?" she asked in a different tone.

I said I had not, and we walked back. The sun stood only one diameter above the horizon, but it still kept its fierce brilliance, so that one had to look away from it. From under the skyline immense white sheets of dead white were rising: the glow of the cosmic conflagration which had started in the nether hemisphere. The circular ridge surrounding the valley grew sharper in its outlines and darker in colour. A faint pink blush was settling on the cones of the two volcanoes.

I almost said: "What a wonderful country!" but checked myself, for my real thought was: I do not want to part from you. And that Lydia knew without any words.

PART FOUR

“What good are these blasted prickles to me when Friday isn’t there!” cried Robinson in despair, hurling a piece of rock at a particularly crooked cactus.

—From *The Modern Robinson* (I. F. Tavrov).

Cordova. Café Progreso, after breakfast.

The Orizaba volcano, at which I was gazing from the train the whole morning, is magnificent, much grander than Popo and Ixta. Gosh, how I would love to climb it! Just up to the snow-line: one always gets the best view half-way up.

Last night in the carriage I felt as though I were leaving part of my soul behind me. Now I know that I'm richer than when I came here. The sun did it, and the blue air, and the people at Sevilla 185—and you. Now and again I lift my hand to the right temple where you kissed me at the last moment and then happiness wells up in me, a happiness so clear and bright that, in defiance of all methods of self-improvement, I refuse to dissociate myself from it, I let its crystalline stream flow through me, and I think: I have not lost her!

Reaching across the incongruous maze of mountains which tumble about the geometrically serene Orizaba, I kiss your sunburnt hands, after which I shall post this letter—if there is such a thing as a letter-box in Cordova—and try to forget the past, including you, so as to settle down in the present and suck in new impressions.

N.G.

Tierra Blanca, a railway junction in the lowlands. The air here is not so blue as over the plateau, just ordinary air; and the sun has the usual golden aura round it. The village, like all Mexican villages, consists of dust, squalid bungalows, dreary Montezumas, pigs, hens and subdued beady-eyed children. Inside a particularly decrepit hut I

espy through the open door a rickety bedstead with a wireless cabinet on it from which issues the most glorious tenor voice I have heard in my life. The hut being empty, I come quite close to the door and listen; a straddling old donkey, its hair white around the eyes, is listening opposite me. What a voice! The tune is Spanish, not Mexican, alive with passion and drama; the interpretation is superb; a cold shiver of delight runs down my spine. It is no use trying to find out who the tenor is—no one would know or care.

In a café I make the acquaintance of the local schoolmistress, an unusually pretty Mexican girl of twenty. I ask her how people live in Tierra Blanca—for I cannot imagine it myself—but my question seems to be too abstract for her, and her answers are as irrelevant as the talk of Tchekhov's Three Sisters. Like them she is obsessed with the idea of getting away from the countryside, her Moscow being Vera Cruz, where she says she has been promised a job. "Still, do tell me," I persist, "what do people do here at Tierra Blanca?" Her pretty eyes reflect an effort at concentration and, after a pause: "*Aquí se mata mucho*" (they kill each other a lot here), she says indifferently. That is a promising beginning, and I try to follow it up. What makes them kill each other? I want to know.

"Oh, all sorts of reasons," says the Señorita, lighting a black, poisonous-looking cigarette. "*Politica. Novias* (fiancées). Money sometimes. . . . Have you ever been to Vera Cruz? No? Ah, it's a grand town, and they've opened a new cinema, which is called Constitucion. It's so big! And so luxurious!" Yes, her eyes are beautiful, but the look in them remains blank, absolutely blank, equally blank whether she is talking of the cinema or murder or her salary. And after a while that unchanging blankness

begins to exasperate me, I feel like shaking her or banging her on the head—anything to make her liven up and show human response, intellectual or emotional. As I am in a civilised country—and a romantic country at that—I dare not touch her, so after having paid my bill I do the next best thing: I say “Adios, Señorita,” and go back to the platform to find out about my train.

The train was due at eleven, and as it is three now, clearly something must happen soon. And something does happen: a faint column of smoke rises above the bush a mile away; there is a slow, shuffling commotion amongst the waiting passengers; half a dozen uniformed station-masters come out of the building and cast imperious glances around them. Five minutes pass, ten, twenty; the only change is that the column of smoke grows thinner and finally disappears. The station-masters look puzzled and shrug their shoulders. Then suddenly it is as though an electric current had been passed through them; they scamper over the rails towards a decrepit-looking shunting engine, they shout and wave their arms. The Montezumas draw their own conclusions from this agitation: they sling their bags off, squat down on the ground and resume chewing their horrid maize cakes.

The train arrived an hour later, and only when I was in it did I learn from the *Auditor*—who was not an auditor but an inspector—what had happened. The engine-driver, it appeared, had forgotten to take in water at the last station, with the result that just before Tierra Blanca the engine had conked out. He had hunted for water in the bush, but finding none he had set off on foot to Tierra Blanca: it was his arrival—unnoticed by me—which had galvanised the station-masters. The shunting engine had then been despatched to the immobilised train and had pulled it in.

Just as the auditor finished his story the train stopped, having travelled a quarter of a mile, and began to crawl back. "Oh, that's nothing," he reassured me, glancing out of the window. "The signalman has put us on the wrong track."

The train races south at twenty miles an hour, swaying dangerously from side to side: it has been raining heavily, and the track has sunken in places. Occasionally a spasm travels along the train; the carriages jerk backwards and forward, and I wonder whether we have rammed a cow or if the driver is practising emergency braking. Under the grey pall of low clouds the bush looks almost English, reminding one of the Surrey woods, except for a few slim, graceful palm-trees growing here and there. The little settlements at which we stop have a Russian look about them: sagging huts with thatched roofs; huge bare squares with rotten poles lying about; chickens and children, puddles and pigs. When being loaded the pigs squeal piercingly and resist heroically; and as there are many of them to be loaded and unloaded we lose a lot of time at every station.

In the carriage a heavy-lidded, well-dressed, burly Mexican with an exaggerated sombrero, a huge revolver in his belt, and a stentorian voice is holding forth a soliloquy in Tchekhov's style. What is life? he asks, spreading his arms wide, and himself supplies the answer: Life is a boat without rudder or oars. Now, what can a man do with such a boat? Obviously nothing; he can only trust the current, *verdad?* So why worry? Money? Ah, money is no good, no good at all, it only brings trouble. It's much better not to have money. He, for

instance, has none, and look at him, he's happy, perfectly happy. . . . He goes on in that vein until the auditor appears and expresses the wish to see his ticket; then it transpires that the sombrero is travelling first on a second-class ticket. The difference please, says the auditor. The sombrero is astounded. Difference? What difference? Why on earth should he pay the difference? he blusters, with big, wide gestures. The auditor explains why. No, no and no, maintains the sombrero with a tremendous conviction. It's all wrong, he's doing no harm by staying where he is; he isn't robbing the railway, is he? He's just sitting peacefully with his dear *amigos* and talking to them and they talk to him. . . . Difference indeed!

Realising that the argument will be a protracted one, the auditor lights a cigarette and sits down next to the sombrero. A group gathers round the two; the issue broadens, swells, becomes overgrown with side-issues; they talk about *igualdad*, *democracia*, *capitalismo*, *justicia*. After having smoked two cigarettes the auditor remembers what it is all about. "The difference, please," he demands, whereupon the sombrero comes forth with his last decisive argument: To oblige Señor Auditor he would gladly pay the difference, although it is neither *justo* nor *democratico*; and he is willing to pay it, but later on, for he has no money with him. "Look at this, hombre, just look!" and he shakes his purse, which contains only a few nickels. The auditor sees the force of the argument and is silenced for a while. Then he has a brain-wave: if the sombrero has no money let him go to the second-class compartment. At that the sombrero is really indignant. What? Second-class? Why second-class? Why should he leave the place where he is happy and his *amigos* are happy? "Now listen, *hombre* . . ."

The guard comes along—a fat, grim-looking man

with the face of a baboon, and the case of Government versus Democracy proceeds with renewed vigour. They talk. And they talk. And finally the sombrero gives in. All right then, since they won't listen to reason, and since they are intent on squeezing him dry, and since he hates to disappoint his *amigos*, who enjoy conversing with him, he will pay the bloody difference, yes, by Jove he will. With a grand flourish he produces a silver watch and dangles it in the air. "A *maravilloso* watch—never stops, never!" he thunders. "Real silver, good Mexican silver! Who will give me twenty pesos for it?" The watch passes from hand to hand; they all inspect it, including some Indios who have oozed out of the second-class compartment; they make appreciative comments, they enquire about the origin and the age of the watch. The sombrero lowers the price from twenty pesos to fifteen, to ten, to six. Finally someone buys it for four pesos fifty. The difference is paid; they are all happy and clap each other on the shoulder; the sombrero treats the lot of them to cigarettes and puts on the agenda the question: What is wrong with the country? The tune is familiar, too familiar, so I cease to listen and reflect on another personal question: Of what use is this exotic scene to me? The answer is: Of no use. It has taught me nothing, it did not generate any thought or emotion in me; it was just a picture.

As I try to decide whether a picture has any value apart from its content—and nine-tenths of English novels are written on the assumption that it has—a dapper *novio* in uncomfortably tight trousers, his hat at a rakish angle, escorts his *novia* past me to the w.c. He opens the door with a flourish, shuts it behind the girl, and leans against it with an uncompromising *On ne passera pas* expression. But as there are no bolts inside—they have been removed

by some practically minded passenger—and as he leans too heavily against the door, it yields all of a sudden and he crashes into the place. They all turn their heads in his direction and stare; no one smiles, until the sombrero shouts something which I cannot catch; then they all burst out laughing.

The night is long. As I cannot sleep I talk to the guard and the auditor, questioning them about the railways—not because I want to be a railway expert, but because, as a rule, people talk best on the subject they know. Both men are more sensible than one might expect on the strength of their bloated faces and listless, dreamy eyes. The railways, they say, are getting from bad to worse, the Government being too engrossed in politics to pay attention to business. The workmen only think of getting higher wages; as wages go up, they work less and less and demand more. The engines are wearing out; the line through not being repaired is sinking in places; in a couple of years traffic will die completely.

They tell me about the wages. An unqualified workman gets £4 a month; an auditor £30; the driver of a passenger train £34, and of a goods train £32; but on goods trains he is allowed to work overtime and can earn up to £50 (purchasing value £75) a month. I remember the pretty schoolmistress at Tierra Blanca telling me that her salary was £5 a month. Is that Socialism? I wonder. Or *cosas Mexicanas*?

We are eight hours late at Jesus Carranza. “That isn’t much,” says the auditor comfortingly. “Last time it was nineteen.”

Jesus Carranza is a big village stretching for a mile

along the railway-line. Its special feature is the Railway Hotel, a stone building with enormously high, dusty rooms. I slept badly, for two engines were panting and hissing right under my window, while only a thin partition divided me from a half-caste couple on their honeymoon. Fortunately for me they were both extraordinarily ugly: I had seen them in the evening walking along the corridor nestling languidly against each other.

I had breakfast in the open-air restaurant attached to the hotel. The waitress was a heavy-bosomed young woman with provocatively swaying hips and dully glowing coal-black eyes—a powerful battery of sex energy. From the rotting fence a row of hideous black vultures attentively watched a pig gobble up some refuse. The space between the tables was filled with a shifting animal population: three lean cats, a dozen hens and a pack of dogs engaged in what the Russians call a Dogs' Wedding. When they came too close to my table I gave one of them a kick and felt ashamed, for my kick was just as automatic as their pursuit.

The blackboard on the wall announced that my train was six hours late, which time I spent in studying the pigs, the huts and the mud of Jesus Carranza. Then I ordered lunch: soup, grilled bananas and vesteg. I knew what vesteg was: near Mexico City they spelt it bifstek, farther south it became vistek, then vesteq—changes which had no influence on the taste of the article since it had none. But the banana fritters were superb; I had three helpings of them.

After lunch the figure on the blackboard was altered from six to nine, so I went for another walk. I walked a mile down the railway-line until I was clear of civilisation, and swerved on to a winding, secretive-looking footpath, so narrow as to be hardly noticeable at ten yards' distance.

A few steps—and the embankment was hidden from sight, I was on all sides enveloped by the silent green jungle.

Nature has many faces, as many as mankind. It can be grim or melancholy, sad or ugly, gay or serious. Now for the first time I beheld its evil face. It had no features, no shape, for all lines were obliterated by the undulating sea of creepers which smothered the grass, the bushes, the trees. Only here and there an isolated tree managed to break with its crown through the immobile green waves; brown dead lianas hung down from its top testifying to the struggle it had gone through. A dead silence reigned in the soft moist air. I knew there was no danger—one could safely lie down and sleep where I was—yet with all my being I felt the presence of evil, too subtle and too quiet to be caught by any particular sense. I felt that it was not good for a man to be here—unless he were an Indio, one of those quiet patient creatures that toil for decades in gentle resignation and then dully and silently cut their master's throat or throw his children into the fire.

I turned to go back and gave a start. On the footpath, a few yards in front of me, a yellow dog was sitting on his haunches staring at me with an arrested look or horror in his round whitish eyes. It was the dog I had seen on the edge of the village as I started on my walk. What was he doing here? Why had he followed me? No dog in any other country would have done that, no other dog would sit as he did, his whole body trembling with fear. As I watched him, his fear communicated itself to me, and like all frightened people I became aggressive: I bent down pretending I was picking up a stone. The next moment the dog was gone—gone as noiselessly as a ghost; only the gently swaying creepers were there to tell me that I had not been dreaming.

The carriage again, with half a dozen Mexicans in it reading newspapers or conversing in subdued, conspiratorial tones. A drunken Indio, his tunic filthy and torn, his straw hat battered as though he had slept on it, staggers in from the second-class compartment, sits down next to a fat, wealthy-looking bourgeois and embarks on an endless soliloquy. "It's all right, Señor, it's all right," he says, patting the fat man on the sleeve with a gentle feminine gesture. "I won't bother you, Señor, I'll just sit quietly. I'm a humble man, an Indio, *verdad?* I'm not doing anything bad, am I? Excuse me, Señor" (for the train jolts and he lurches against his neighbour). "Excuse me, I couldn't help it. They say I'm a drunkard. But I'm not a drunkard, not at all." (He hiccups and tries to sit up, but his body sags in the middle.) "I like *pulque*, of course I do. But I'm a poor Indio, so I don't get much *pulque*, because I haven't the money to buy it, *verdad?*"

The Señor fidgets impatiently on his seat, mutters an annoyed: "*Si, si,*" and pretends to read the paper. It never occurs to him to chase the Indio away. For Mexico is a democratic country, much more democratic than any country in Europe, and an Indio beggar is perfectly entitled to talk as an equal to the smartest gentleman. But to do so in a train he must have a proper ticket, and this particular Indio has no first-class ticket. In fact, he has no ticket at all, and when the conductor demands the fare, it appears that he has no money either. So the conductor pushes him into the second-class compartment, and at the next station a stream of whining protestations joined to the sound of a scuffle tells me that the Indio is being evicted from the train.

I make the conductor, who is a native of this district,

talk about his country. The soil here is fabulously rich. Maize yields three or even four crops a year. There is no need to plough: one Indio walks along with a pole, making holes in the ground, and another Indio behind him drops the grain into the holes; that is all—nature does the rest. Yet the people are very poor, abjectly poor. Why so? Oh, laziness: they don't like to work. But surely some of them do? No, why should they if by making a few holes in the ground they can get enough to keep themselves alive? Besides, if they did work there would be no buyers for their produce, for everybody has all the maize and wheat and bananas he wants. "Bad, very bad," concludes the conductor, and I dream of a Great Dictator, a Napoleon of Industry who will pep up this indolent race, transform the riotous jungle into a blooming garden of civilisation, and . . . and what? Assuming that the budget of the average Indio goes up from 37.4 to 987 pesos; that the trains do fifty-two miles per hour, that there are fourteen evil-smelling factories per square mile, and bustle and hustle and cheap newspapers and chewing-gum and vulgar cinemas and . . . and what of it? Will these fifteen million Indios be happier than they are now? Mistrusting all generalisations, I refrain from answering the question one way or another, but I remember two impressions associated with London: the animated, excited, chatting groups of shop-girls, street urchins and costermongers; and those frozen, bored, lifeless faces which look at you out of the windows of expensive cars.

Coatzacoalcos. From the window of an almost European hotel one sees acres of rusty roofs cut up into regular squares by sandy grey streets; ugly sand-

dunes indicating the coastline; and the river with the monotonous unbroken sea of the jungle on its other bank. At the breakwater a ship is aground. I ask how long she has been there, and the first four answers I get are: a week—a month—a fortnight—six weeks. *Ganz Russisch*, as Nietzsche would have said.

The population of the town consists of:

Boot-cleaners	10%
Innkeepers and their staffs	10%
Traders and artisans	30%
Loafers	90%

If the total comes to 140% that is not my fault, but one of the *cosas Mexicanas* which a European is not supposed to understand. My tentative explanation of this statistical conundrum is that a certain proportion of traders, artisans, etc., are also loafers in their spare time.

On a pole so rotten that one cannot imagine why it has not collapsed yet two printed slips are affixed. One has the heading: "Strike," and enjoins upon the workmen of the province to cease work at noon on August 12, which was five months ago. The other slip is an announcement of the Festive Committee of Minatitlan:

"On the 29th of January, the anniversary of the Constitution, in the early hours of the day, bells will be rung, guns discharged, and a band will play gay tunes expressing the happiness, the joy and the delight which the nine following days will bring to our fellow-citizens. From 10 a.m. till noon a select programme of music will be performed on the motor-launch quay. At the same time another band will make a tour of the town. . . ."

The tanker *San Marino*, being delayed, I had absolutely nothing to do for four days except sleep, walk about the cold beach, which, under the low grey sky, reminded me most unpleasantly of a place near Newcastle, and eat quantities of pineapples—unbelievably good. In bed, before falling asleep, I would listen to the wireless music which poured into my room from all sides. The programmes of the Mexican radio stations are very ambitious and include a high proportion of symphonic works—quite well played, too. In Coatzacoalcas I heard Mozart's Requiem, a Beethoven Concerto, his Fifth Symphony and the second Concerto of Chopin, the last two being played simultaneously, one under my window and the other across the corridor.

The waiting is over at last; the tanker is due in an hour's time. I take my case and my rucksack to the custom house. Five officials sit gravely round a table, all in brand-new uniforms, with outsize revolvers in their belts. Like all Mexican bureaucrats, they are overfed, have bloated, pear-shaped faces (the thick end down) and bulging bellies. They cast a glance at my luggage and confer in subdued voices, gravely, unhurriedly, with long pauses. One of them comes up to my case, prods it half-heartedly with his finger, and returns to the table. The conference continues for a while; then another official asks me where I am going. I say: "To England," and he stares at me, whether approvingly or with murderous intent I cannot tell. Would I produce my passport *por favor?* says Number Three. I hand it to him; he twiddles it in his fingers and gives it back to me, his face showing clearly that he has no idea what he wanted it for. "Have you

been long in Mexico?" enquires Number Four. Two months, I say. "Two months," he echoes, takes out a pipe, and starts stuffing it, while the others stare at me. "Can I go now?" I ask. They exchange serious glances with each other and shake their heads. It strikes me that we are not getting any forrarder, and, as I do not wish to miss the tanker, I venture to suggest that perhaps the señores would be so kind as *por favor* to inspect my luggage. To my surprise they instantly concur with my suggestion: Number Five gets up, makes me open my case, asks me what is in it, and, before I have time to answer, says: "*Está bien.*" Now I may go, now I am through with Mexico.

I experienced everything implied in the word Patriotism when, having climbed up the rope ladder of the *San Marino*, I heard the harsh sound of English, saw the bony Anglo-Saxon faces, and sensed the atmosphere of quiet intelligent efficiency. The first thing I did was to go into the cabin, find the steward and chat with him to my heart's content about nothing in particular. After a week with the Montezumas I felt I had had enough of Mexico.

The oil-tankers of the big companies are the Guards of the Mercantile Marine. The salaries are higher than on tramp steamers, the food is good, the ships are kept in trim. The mates of the *San Marino* could not understand why I was so impressed with the cleanliness of the saloon, the electric fans, the mosquito-netting, and particularly the food, until they heard that I had come by the *Dewhurst*. "Oh, the *Dewhurst*!" they echoed on a note of compassion, for they knew all about Messrs. Tweedy. No,

their company treated them quite decently: they had bonuses and regular holidays, the owners saw to their comfort, the superintendents were their collaborators, and not their enemies. I thought of the splendid men on the *Dewhurst*, and my heart grew heavy with a sense of injustice. But before Righteous Indignation had gathered impetus in me I had time to produce my double, who reminded me that no one either wanted or would profit by my indignation, while I should lose so many units of energy to no purpose. As he watched me, the mechanism slowed down, then stopped altogether.

The Gulf—the Straits of Florida—the Bahamas—then the immense wintry ocean: an infinity of grey sky, grey waves and wind. Charts and watches; sextants and painting; contemplation and nautical talk. Why is it necessary to have high rails on deck? Was the recent raising of the Plimsoll line justified or not? What is the advantage of the gyroscopic compass?

They were fine men: of the four, only one was second-rate, and even he was not bad, only petty and pestersome. They all dressed more neatly than the mates on the *Dewhurst*, and perhaps that was why they were somewhat stiffer. Particularly the first mate, a tall man with a lean ascetic face and a deliberately assumed look of preoccupation serving as a screen for his emotions. It took me a week's manœuvring to make him show me the photograph of his wife; but thereafter it was plain sailing, and I soon knew where he had been brought up, why he had chosen a seaman's career, and what his prospects were of getting a job ashore.

The first half of the journey I thought of Lydia, the

second of Nadya. I was taking her some presents, and now I decided to make one more. The thousands of hours I had spent at the table over books and manuscripts had stiffened my muscles and made me stoop heavily. "To look at the way you stand one might think you were seventy," she used to say. So now I set out to straighten myself. I would stand in the doorway of my room with my back pressed against one lintel and push hard with my hands against the other. It was a painful process, and the first days all my bones ached as though I had been beaten up. But I persevered, and towards the end of the journey I achieved a noticeable improvement.

Home: at first a faint bluish line on the horizon; then the fairway between two rows of pathetically lonely buoys; then the river, grimy, narrow, stuffy after the ocean. Home: impatient excitement which gives a clearer ring to the voice, a bright gleam to the eye, a nervous briskness to the movements. The first mate, freshly shaven and looking years younger, stands on the bridge smoking one cigarette after another and peering in the direction from which the tugboat with "them" must come: for we had to cast anchor mid-stream, all berths being occupied. "No, that's not it," he mutters as a boat emerges from behind a white liner, and although I am close to him I know he is unaware of my presence. Sparks comes up to us, for no other reason than that he finds it difficult to stay in one place. "Last time they couldn't get a boat for six hours," he says, staring in the same direction as the first mate. The mate says nothing, and there is a long pause. Another tugboat appears from behind the liner, but it's going across the river: the wrong boat again. "See

there? That's an aircraft-carrier," says the mate, pointing at a shapeless mass on the southern bank; and he proceeds to tell me that they are building her at a terrific speed, that she will carry so many aeroplanes and do so many knots. But his soul is not in these data: he is only talking to deceive his impatience. "That's good," he says, with satisfaction when the bell rings for the evening meal; for eating is another means of passing time.

After the meal the watch is resumed. The mate paces up and down the bridge—can footsteps be impatient, or am I reading that quality into them? Sparks and the second mate stand on the deck by the officers' w.c. and talk intermittently. A head appears against the dusky sky above them: the Captain.

"Nothing in sight yet?" he asks.

"No, sir."

"Oh, well, they can't be long now."

"No, sir. The tugs must be busy."

"Yes, that must be it."

A pause. Then the Captain's head disappears, and now it is four feet that tramp impatiently up and down the bridge. Darkness falls, melting all shapes, scattering white, red and green dots of light all over the black river. "That may be them," says a voice I cannot recognise, referring to two dots, red and green, which are crawling towards us. They come nearer, they are heading straight for us. But at the last moment they begin to shift, slowly drawing closer to each other, which means that the boat is swerving away from us. "Damn! It's almost eight," grumbles the second mate.

Another hour passes before the magic words: "They're coming!" resound from the bridge. There is a clatter of feet, a few orders are given, and a group of men collects by the starboard ladder. I slink back into the saloon and

talk to the steward. He is a bachelor and a confirmed one: to his mind, seamen have no business to marry; yet he, too, looks younger with the reflected happiness of the others. "I'd better go and make tea," he says. "I'm sure the ladies won't mind a cup."

Footsteps in the passage; some short subdued sentences; the sound of doors being closed and keys being turned—and the ship is plunged into silence, an unfamiliar, satisfied silence, alive with an intimate warm life: home life. Only when passing along the inner corridor does one catch some whispering behind the mahogany doors.

PART FIVE

“Is it you, Friday?” exclaimed Robinson in utter bewilderment. “Or is it your ghost? Or do you possess the rare talent of being in two places at once?”

—From *The Modern Robinson* (I. F. Tavrov).

DUSK was falling when I reached our street. On the pavement a prim, respectable-looking female was waiting for an over-fattened spaniel to complete its acquaintance with a lamp-post; another equally respectable lady was sitting by the window next to her peke, and there was a curious likeness in the expression of the two. I noticed that my attitude to these social sights had changed: they did not irritate me any more, the women simply seemed pathetic to me. That's better, I thought, remembering my talk on tolerance with Lydia.

Our house was dark except for the windows of the big bedroom: their curtains were drawn and light was oozing out through the chink between them. Six-thirty—the wrong time for her to be in the bedroom; therefore. . . . Somehow I knew she was ill, and gave the elastic a tentative pull, to make sure it worked. I felt no alarm: the health I had accumulated during my long holiday formed a protective crust over my emotions. Whatever happens I must keep them down, I must! No, that's wrong: not keep them down but keep at a distance from them, see them as something separate from myself, autonomous mechanisms working at the expense of my vitality. . . .

In the hall I met Xenia, looking prettier than usual because of the bright light of anxiety in her eyes, and the doctor, who was just about to leave. I spoke to him. Acute anæmia and heart failure, he said; the patient must be removed to hospital, and that at once. In all probability she would pull through, but her condition was

dangerous, and absolute rest, which she would not have at home, essential. "I'm sorry you're having such a sad homecoming. . . ."

I pulled the elastic in earnest. There they were, welling up in me, trying to flood me, the all too familiar emotions of pity and self-pity, despondency and revolt, emotions formed by twenty years of worry, consolidated by constant repetition into a powerful habit. They are not I, they belong to that man two yards in front of me, the man who does not grow and must be made to grow. . . .

Having seen the doctor off I went upstairs.

"That's what comes of leaving you alone," I said, bending over her and kissing her drawn, pale face. "How long have you been like this? And exactly what happened?"

She told me. First the children had been ill, both at the same time, and she had nursed them for three weeks; then there was more trouble, some personal trouble of hers. I could guess the rest: being an over-conscientious woman and a proud woman, she would not ask for anybody's help and had gone on working till she broke down. At present she felt no pain, only extreme weakness: she could hardly move her arm, and her heart beat like mad.

"And how are you?" she asked.

"I am all right."

"You are sunburnt, quite black. . . . And how is Lydia?"

"As charming as ever. She sends you her love."

"So you are glad you've made this trip?"

"Oh yes, it was frightfully interesting."

My voice sounded listless to my ears. Lydia, the ocean, Mexico, the seamen—the whole trip had already become irrelevant and unsubstantial, like a dream; all life had gone out of it.

She scrutinised me, and before she had opened her mouth I knew what she would say.

"You are like a stranger," she said. "So . . . unfeeling. What's the matter? Did you fall in love with Lydia?"

"No, I didn't."

"What is it then?"

"I suppose it's the shock of finding you in this condition."

That was the truth, but not the whole truth. She had guessed right, I was unfeeling, all tied-up inside. I wanted to give her that emotional warmth which she needed and was asking of me, and I could not.

"Now what about the hospital?" I said, to change the subject. "The doctor absolutely insists on your going there."

"I know. But it's so expensive; we can't afford it. And I don't want to leave home."

"You'll have to. He says you must go to-morrow."

"No, not to-morrow. Can't I stay a few days, and if I'm not better then. . . . ?"

"No, he's quite firm about it. It'll have to be to-morrow."

Gloomy thoughts rising, thoughts of money. The hospital: a guinea a day plus doctor's fees, heaven knows for how many days and weeks. Where shall I get the money? What will happen when I've spent my last guinea? Unpaid rent—eviction—how the hell am I going to work without a home? . . . I pulled the elastic frantically, and under the double's glance the gloom began to detach itself from me, I saw it for what it was; habitual fear of things imagined, things which had not happened yet and might never happen. So long as I manage to see that fear separately from myself, as an automatic mechanism, I shall not succumb to it. . . .

Nadya was looking at the ceiling, and there was pain in her eyes, pain at the indifference she sensed in me. Once more I took refuge in talking and started questioning her about the children, the house, our friends. She answered, and her voice sounded dispirited, weary.

"But I'm sure you are hungry," she interrupted herself. "You haven't had tea, have you?"

"No. No lunch either."

"Then you'd better have supper now. Ask Xenia to make coffee for you."

"I can do it myself."

I had coffee downstairs, then I sat and brooded. I was doing the right thing, but somehow the right thing was turning wrong, inasmuch as it hurt her. Why was that?

The answer was long and complicated. I had failed to live up to the situation not because of anything I had done or omitted to do in the last hour or day or week, but because I was I, a man with a particular Karma, a set of automatic mental habits which I had let grow in me for more than thirty years, and which now did not let me be and do what I wanted to be and do.

Ever since I remember myself there was one constant conflict in me: consciousness versus my emotional, temperamental nature. I despised myself for my emotionalism because it often made me acutely miserable, frustrated my attempts at introducing order into my inner life, and offended my conception of what a man should be; and I despised other people in whom I recognised that quality. During the war, when the whole of Russia—or rather the Russian intelligentsia—went hysterical, I started hating Russia. Perhaps it was that hatred which in 1916 made me go to England. The English, I thought, were well-balanced, in their company I would learn how to dominate my unruly self.

Life in comparatively unemotional England might have helped me had it not been for the abnormal pressure which circumstances brought to bear on me almost immediately after my migration. The Russian Revolution destroyed both my mental background and my material security: I found myself an alien, a man with no country behind me, a man whom nobody wanted. After a few years of painful adjustment I got a clerk's job in Newcastle. I kept it for ten years, hating Newcastle, my loneliness, my surroundings, and the dehumanising mechanical work I was doing. Then the great slump came, and I found myself unemployed at a time when no jobs were going, worse off than when Russia had crumpled up, with my savings gone. I wrote novels which brought me twenty-five pounds apiece, I did some casual work and incurred debts which as time went on looked more and more like charity, in fact were charity. Worst of all, I had a wife whom I loved, whose comfort and peace were my *idée fixe*, for I felt I must compensate her for the extremely difficult life she had had in Russia.

No one can go through these experiences, not if they last for twelve years, without being seriously shaken. It was natural that, instead of learning to dominate my emotions, I succumbed to them more and more. Nadya could not help me. She bore the strain much more bravely than I did, but she was an emotional woman herself, and her very virtues—her extreme conscientiousness, her recklessness in spending her strength, and that talent for compassion and pain which the best women often have—were calculated to increase my anxiety for her and the weight of my responsibility. Towards the end of my stay in Newcastle that responsibility was crushing me; had it not been for the assistance of my friends who

enabled me to move to London and devote myself to writing, I should have become a nervous wreck.

That horrid period was over, but its consequences were not. Our relationship had emerged from it with unbroken affection, but that affection—at least on my part—was surcharged with worry. And life still would not give us respite: our financial position in London was about as bad as it had been in Newcastle, and Nadya went on overworking. Worry for her became, as I had told Lydia, the strongest of my mental habits (because connected with sex), a habit so thoroughly fused with my affection for her that I could not separate them even with the help of my double. And that was why, now that she had broken down, I could not give her the warmth of feeling which she expected of me. My dilemma was this: if I let myself be “natural,” that is sympathetic and tender, I should not be able to keep out the other, negative emotions: they would rush in, throw me off my balance, and deplete the stock of my vitality which Nadya needed as much as I did. And if those negative emotions were to be kept out, I had to be “unfeeling,” as she called it, that is hold in check my affection and concentrate on preserving order in my own self. I chose the latter course. It was obviously not satisfactory and had a nasty flavour of selfishness about it, but it was the lesser evil of the two: better hurt her than give new food to the terrible habit of worry. . . . That was what I thought then; and now I know I was right.

The next day an ambulance took her to hospital. Now that there was no demand on my emotions and the weight of responsibility had been taken off my shoulders—for she

was having the best care possible, our friends had seen to that—I could relax and with a clear conscience live my normal life. I slept well, started writing a short story about a crocodile marooned in the Caucasus, and saw people.

One of my first visits was to Lina, the young woman about whom I had told Lydia. We lunched and went for a walk in Regent's Park. Must I go now? I asked when I had seen her to her house. No, she said; so we went in and had tea. As she was passing me the sugar I smiled, not because of the sugar, but because I remembered the red cardboard boxes in which my father's cigarettes were packed. On their lids they had the picture of a slim exotic girl half-reclining on a divan, and I, then a boy of eight or nine, was fascinated by that girl and collected the lids: I had a heap of them in my drawer, carefully hidden under my other rubbish. They lost their fascination as I grew up, but the type of the girl did not: in my adolescence and my youth, whenever I gave rein to my imagination, it always evoked the same Southern woman with coal-black hair, black eyes, shady eyelashes and a pathetically gentle oval face. Somehow I had never come across the type in actual life, not until now.

In appearance she was the opposite of Lydia: South versus North. But my first impression had been right: mentally they had a lot in common: the same cautious restraint of manner, indicative of self-examination; the same instinctive way of taking in an impression not piecemeal, but at once and as a whole; the same fastidiousness of taste; the same capacity for understanding, emotional and intellectual. I liked her mind, I liked the way she spoke of other people, I liked her silences—easy intelligent silences; and I thought she was ravishing . . . I wish I could give a fuller description of that rich,

intense and beautifully-moulded nature, but I must keep her unrecognisable. A first-rate woman, I thought with elation, when leaving her that afternoon.

A week later Nadya was out of danger. There was no question of her moving home yet, but the doctor said that given proper rest she would be quite well in a couple of months. "That must be a relief to you," he added, and I assented, insincerely, for I had not been worrying at all since she had gone to hospital.

I practised self-detachment a lot that week, more than I had ever done before. What I saw in myself was perfectly clear, and no amount of observation had the slightest effect on it. Time and again I asked myself, first in bewilderment, then with fear: Can this be true? Perhaps I am exaggerating or imagining? But the answer was No every time: the thing was genuine. When I felt quite sure of that, my fear passed and I realised that what had happened was all to the good. I had wanted an opportunity of testing my Credo and there it was. "Don't worry about consequences, just go ahead," said my double, quietly, as he always spoke.

I took Lina to Wimbledon Common and we had a long walk. I was in good form—chatty, excited and amused at my excitement. Then I dried up and felt restless, which meant that the time had come to speak out.

"Will you mind if I am very frank with you? Indecently frank?" I asked her.

"No," she said, without much surprise. She cast a quick glance at me, and I saw her grow serious.

"In that case let's sit down. I'm going to shock you,

and one should never take a shock standing. Economy of vitality."

Whereupon we sat down and I began as all good writers do: from the middle:

"I am rapidly falling in love with you. This week I've gone half-way, and unless we part now, I'll have gone the rest of it in another week or so. The obsession of thought is complete; the moment my mind is free I begin to think of you—I have to and I want to. The emotional tension is not fully developed yet: I always long to be with you, but I still can control my longing fairly easily. As for the physical side of it, in my life I've only met three women who attracted me as strongly as you do—irresistibly, as the novelists say. Thank heaven I don't think of you in terms of kisses and undressing, but . . . oh well, potentially it's all there.

"I didn't want to fall in love with you, I had never expected it would happen, and at first, when I saw it happen, I rebelled. For I always pay too heavily for my infatuations; I've had enough romantic misery and don't want any more. No one has the right to be miserable, and I least of all: I simply can't afford to waste my energy, because I need it all for my wife and for the book which I must start very soon, the book about Lydia.

"I've only seen you for nine hours all told—I've counted up—but somehow I know you enough to say that if I were free I would ask you here and now to marry me. That's a purely hypothetical declaration, of course. The fact that I'm almost exactly twice your age might not matter very much, but there are two other bigger facts which do matter: one is my wife, whom I love with an all-round love, with whom I am happy, and whom I wouldn't give up for anything: I'd rather throw myself in the Thames at its filthiest spot. The other fact is that I have

nothing to offer you, I'm as poor as a church rat, and you aren't used to poverty. So if I have mentioned the word marriage it was only to show you how I feel about you. . . . By the way, do you understand that a man can love his wife and yet be in love with another woman? Or does the idea seem false or incomprehensible to you?"

She shook her head. When sitting she had the same effect of being neatly collected as a cat has. She was looking down with her hands crossed on her lap, her eyelashes drooping over her cheeks, which were slightly flushed.

"Very well, then," I continued. "Just now is my last chance of breaking away from you of my own accord: later on I shan't have the strength to do it. But I'm not going to break away. I never wanted this love, but since it has come of itself, I accept it, gladly, because it gives me an opportunity of doing some hard work on myself. I accept it and am going to try and make a good job of it. I must prove to myself that I can love a woman—or rather two women—without being miserable myself or making anyone else miserable. If I can't do that, I shall pay for it, and I'm afraid my wife will pay as well; but I shall take that risk. Needless to say, she knows nothing about it and will know nothing until all danger is over. So long as I go on loving her as before, my feelings for you are my business and nobody else's.

"Of course, you may tell me to clear out either now, when I have finished, or later on, when you get tired of my uttered or unuttered homage. If you do it now I shan't be heart-broken or even sorry; that will be another opportunity to do some work on myself. Part of me, the weaker part, will even welcome that solution, because it's obviously safer and wiser from the practical point of view. But I repeat, that of my own accord I won't turn

away from you. My Credo—you remember what I told you about it last time?—compels me to take the unsafe and unwise line, the line of greatest resistance. I really believe that I know how not to lose my head and not make a mess; and I cannot, I must not, let go this occasion of testing my knowledge. Besides, I should hate to lose you. In these nine hours I've spent with you, you've come to mean a lot to me, I find in you everything that I found in Lydia. You are the English continuation of her and . . . and damn it all, it can't be bad for a man to look at beauty!

“What I propose to do is ambitious. I propose to try and love you as I love Lydia, that is to say—excuse the hackneyed word—platonically. The trouble, of course, is this physical attraction you have for me. I can't hope to suppress it—it takes a full-blown Yogi to do that—and I shan't even try; and yet something will have to be done about it or it'll blow my intentions to pieces and land me in misery. Everything conspires against my success: this wonderful spring, the stock of health which I've brought back from my holiday, the fact that I've been a bachelor for several months, and most of all those marvellous eyes of yours. You may have noticed that when talking to you I usually look away or on the ground; that is because when I see your eyes, something catches me by the throat, and then I can't talk. To be frank, I simply don't see how I shall ever get that physical force under control; I have only some vague idea that perhaps you'll be able to help me, I don't know how. Anyway, I have to try, and the more difficult it is the better. . . . Well, that's all. I hope I've made myself clear: I've carefully prepared this speech so as not to omit anything. I've spoken so frankly because I believe in frankness, and I want our relationship—if there is to be any—to be conscious right

from the beginning. The better we know the parts we play in it the freer it will be from misunderstandings and grudges and habits—all that rubbish which clogs most relationships. Now then, shall I go?"

Pounding heart, whirling thoughts, vibrating emotions. And yet I, my Great Body, was calm and quite indifferent to what she would decide. "That's right, that's as it should be," said my double.

"No, you needn't go," she said in a low voice. Then, raising her head and looking me straight in the face: "You also mean very much to me."

That was exactly what Lydia had said to me twenty-seven years ago, word for word. For I was the same man as I had been then, with the same Karma which attracted the same events. With the difference that now I knew my Karma and was able to counteract it—or at least try to counteract it.

"Are you sure," I asked, "that your decision comes not from pity and not from consideration for me, but expresses your own wish?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Only . . . only I don't want you to be unhappy on my account." Then, with one of those sudden changes characteristic of her: "I should hate it, hate it!" she cried, clenching her hands spasmodically.

"You needn't worry about that," I said. "My happiness or unhappiness don't depend on you or anybody else—unless you deliberately set out to cause me pain, which I know you won't do. No, let's understand once and for all that each of us has to shift for himself. It's just by mixing their parts and trying to think for each other that people make a mess of their relationships. He is unhappy—so she worries about him—and then he starts worrying about her worry, and that makes her more unhappy still. Let's be grown up and avoid this

gratuitous multiplication of trouble. Just now, for instance, I might start pondering whether my shocking declaration will or will not destroy the peace of your mind. Well, I won't do that. If I don't know what I myself am heading for, how the devil can I tell what effect my feelings will have on you? You have to fend for yourself. Is that agreeable? Yes?

"Very well then. Now I'll tell you another thing. My body wants you to respond to my feelings and give yourself to me. I don't apologise for it because the silly thing doesn't know any better. But I, as a whole, my Great Body, that self of mine which forbids me to run away from your dangerous eyes, definitely does not want your response. This because my only chance of keeping myself in hand—and not a fat chance it is either—depends on your keeping cool. If you fall in love with me I shall lose my head at once, and then we shall both be in the soup. So don't do it. Be on your guard against it. If you ever notice that our relationship is assuming a poetic halo in your mind, remind yourself of the other, realistic aspect of the business: the ludicrous disparity of our ages, my poverty, and the fact that I have a wife whom I love and with whom I couldn't part."

She smiled that restrained gentle smile which she has in common with Lydia.

"You're talking to me as though I were a schoolgirl," she said.

"Not a schoolgirl, but a very, very young person."

She kept on smiling, but the look in her eyes was serious, and there was a note of sadness in her voice when she said:

"But I'm not young really, not so young as you think."

I was going to make some joke, but checked myself. Yes, she was right, somehow she understood more about

life than was natural for her age. Instinct. . . .

"And I know that it's no use worrying about other people's happiness," she continued. "I've often thought that myself."

"So much the better. Well, the position is clear now. I shall continue my exciting journey along the path of greatest resistance and hope for the best. And you—you'll have to look after yourself. When and if I see that I've lost my head and become miserable I'll part with you; and when you are tired of me you'll tell me so at once, without mincing matters, so as to spare me the uncertainty. Promise you'll do that?"

She nodded.

"Thank you. But please don't look so exceedingly serious. One might think you were responsible for all the orphans in Greater London."

"I can't help it," she said, smiling and frowning at the same time. "I'm afraid you'll be unhappy over me."

"You are repeating yourself. Firstly, I'm not unhappy and hope not to be; and secondly, if I am it'll be my fault, because I know how to avoid unhappiness. But I see that nothing short of ice-cream will dispel your sad cogitations. Come along, I'll stand you a threepenny block, that's the most I can afford. . . ."

At home I looked into the mirror. As a rule my face bores me intensely, I find it not exactly repulsive but dull, ordinary and inexpressive. This time I liked it, I found it alive, intelligent and surprisingly young. Why? Was I seeing myself with different eyes? Or were my facial muscles actually affected by my inner state?

As I looked I noticed another thing, a white hair, the very first to adorn my temple. The discovery struck me as somewhat inopportune; mechanically, imitating the gesture of millions of men and women, I isolated the

compromising hair with my fingers and was about to pull it out when my double stopped me. "Now why are you doing this?" he asked with curiosity. For a moment I hesitated; then I unclasped my fingers and lowered my arm. No, I did not want to pretend or fake, I had outgrown that.

Nadya was rapidly getting better; the first flush had appeared on her cheeks and—unmistakable sign of returning vitality—the dim veiled look had gone from her eyes, they were as bright as before. As her condition improved, the knot of emotional inhibition in me grew looser, and I could give her more sympathy and tenderness without disorganising my inner world. According to the novels which deal with similar situations, I ought to have been loving her less than before, comparing her with Lina and mixing up the two of them sometimes. That was not my experience. My feeling for the one interfered with my feeling for the other as little as if they were just friends of mine. I had always had a separate life of my own in which Nadya did not participate, a life of relationships with people she hardly knew or did not know at all—as Lydia for instance; and now to that separate life another complex of thoughts and feelings had been added which affected our relationship as little as my trip to Mexico had done. Lying? Yes, that was unpleasant—for it went against the systematically cultivated habit of telling the truth; but it could not be helped. The risk of hurting her in the future? Since I had considered that risk and decided to take it, to think of it now would be to conjure up trouble.

Or was I lying to myself? Was all that talk about the

Credo and the line of Greatest Resistance but a smoke-screen I was letting out in order to indulge in the very common and un-philosophical business of running after a pretty woman? My answer to this was that I had started building up my Credo four years ago, long before I had known of Lina's existence, at a time when there was no woman on my horizon. That sounded conclusive. And yet, and yet . . . what if without exactly lying to myself I was deceiving myself? That extra-liberal philosophy which by making me the only arbiter of my behaviour freed me from all outward restrictions—had I not adopted it because I knew I was potentially a bigamist, and, knowing that, had prepared beforehand a high-sounding justification for any amorous adventure that might come my way? Could I say with conviction that that was not the case? No, I could not; the question was unanswerable. But then it was an unfair question. Since I do not know why I felt cross at nine this morning, or why I have started re-reading *Hamlet*, how can I be expected to know what my ultimate purpose was in forming this and not that outlook on life? A man's philosophy—provided it is a living system and not just arbitrary cerebration—will never be more than his personal history written in abstract terms, an ideological extract from all the events, thoughts and feelings of which his life was made in the past; and to deduce it from any particular event or purpose would be as wrong as to attribute the outbreak of war to a particular newspaper.

I hate writing short stories, but the figure of the hospital bill made me sit down, set my teeth and tackle a story of which I had the plan ready in my mind. It

was about a G.P.U. man and his encounter with a ghost. To begin with, I meant to outline the character of the man and his antecedents. Let him not be the traditional bloodthirsty villain, but an ordinary man, even an idealist, who had been driven into the G.P.U. service by some cruel injustice he had suffered at the hands of the Whites.

Whenever Fyodor Baltin remembered his student years he had the uncomfortable feeling that he was looking not at himself, but at somebody who had nothing but the name in common with him. . . .

Those eyes of hers. . . . She ought to have a hundred men in love with her, but apparently she has not. Why is that? The answer is simple: lack of vanity. She does not care a rap for admiration, she never thinks of her prettiness, never notices when people look at her in the street; she just sails along, dreamily aloof, pensively gazing straight ahead, never turning her head, not even when she crosses the street. Isolated, like a somnambulist—or a cat; yet mentally alert the whole time, eager to laugh and listen and think—laugh like a schoolgirl, think like a woman. “You also mean a lot to me”—and her eyes when she said that . . . why can’t I kiss her eyes, her head, her throat, press her to myself, have the whole of her? “You mean a lot to me”—that may be the beginning of love. Queerer things, more impossible things have happened in the world. And wanting, my wanting her, is a force, a real force which can do as much as youth and handsome features. . . .

The elastic, quick! A twist—and the double looks at me and sees a serious-minded grown-up man who, instead of doing what he intended to do, fritters away his energy in vain erotic imaginings. I shake myself, I relax the strained muscles around my shoulders and sit

up straight. My breath is short—I relax the diaphragm and breathe in deeply several times. The pulse—ahem! it must be well over a hundred, but I cannot do anything about that. One hand is nervously clasping the arm of the chair—I put my hand on the table and look at it, look fixedly at the muscles straining under the skin. . . . That's better. Now for the inner disorder, those images and emotions. Automatic activity: press the button Sex, and the wheels start turning first in the Imagination Department of the Intellect, then in the emotional system, exactly as they have done a thousand times before, five, twenty, thirty years ago; and they will go on turning for hours and days if I let them. Do I want all that? No, I do not, this automatic repetition bores me, I am tired of being a machine, I want to grow and expand, not repeat myself, not go over the same circle over and over again. I want to be free, able to do what the whole of me prompts me to do. For the moment the whole of me has decided to work, so I am jolly well going to work. Now then:

At the outbreak of the Revolution Fyodor Baltin, then a student of the Moscow University. . . .

I write a few sentences. They are clumsy and disconnected, they sound laboured. Once more I pull the elastic. I wish my double not only looked at me, but said something too. For he is almost four years old and can be articulate sometimes.

My wish is fulfilled.

"You have made a double mistake," he says. "You have started writing too early, before calming down, with the mechanism of sexual imagination still spinning in you. No wonder your writing is disjointed. And—your second mistake—you have been impatient, you have willed the sex impulse in you to die down. That won't

do. Haven't I explained to you again and again, that you must never try to suppress anything in you, but wait till it suppresses itself? Which it will do if you look at it—if we both look at it—from the end of the elastic. There is nothing wrong with your loving and desiring the woman: she is lovely and worth loving—you need not pretend she is not. But why waste yourself in these spasms of imagination? They do not bring you an inch nearer your goal, whatever that goal may be. They are conditioned reflexes: the dog hears the bell, and the saliva starts flowing; you think of her, and your imagination is stirred up, imagination sets emotion going, emotion engages the whole of the intellect—and there you are with your little universe in a state of chaos, with your vitality streaming out at every pore. Live and love by all means, for that is what you are meant to do, but what you are indulging in now is neither life nor love, but a poor cinematographic reproduction of both.

“Look at yourself, look from where I am, with my eyes. Let me get farther away, so as to keep you well in focus. Pull the elastic harder! Now look. Wheels turning and screeching, scratching and jamming each other—an engine that has no mechanic to attend to it, no co-ordination between its parts, each of which is chugging away for all it is worth, without considering its neighbours, without having a notion of what it should be doing. That tight feeling in your throat, for instance, what is it doing there? Can you find the stupid muscle responsible for it? You can? All right then, relax it. Easy, isn't it? But it will be much easier after you have done it another five hundred times. Or that strain in your chest—you can remove that, too, if you try. Now your intellect. Just go on watching it, watching not her eyes, but the mechanism of imagination which impresses

them on the film of your intellect; and after you have done it for a minute or so, shift your attention to the emotional disturbance. But do not slacken the elastic, keep it tight. . . .

"Tired, are you? All right, have a cigarette. It is a mechanical habit, as we both know, but a harmless one. Or have a biscuit. Oh, by the way, what about those biscuits you must take to hospital to-morrow? I am glad you remembered them—and incidentally your wife, too, because that will help you to break the momentum of your imaginings. Wife—home—money—the G.P.U. man—you follow the sequence? Yes, you simply must finish your story at top speed. Never mind it being worthless compared to your high-flown literary ambitions; the point is that with luck it may bring in a tenner, and your balance at the bank is . . . heavens! the fellow has not even had the courage to look up his cheque-book! Anyhow, it can't be more than thirty pounds, which is damned little. So say *au revoir* to those marvellous eyes of hers. You'll see her the day after to-morrow and then . . ."

I interrupt him. "I might see her to-morrow. You have nothing against my seeing her, have you? So why should I wait two days instead of one?"

"I wouldn't do that," he retorts. "Do not force events, stick to your original arrangement. Discipline is an excellent thing—in moderation. . . . Very well then, you will see her the day after to-morrow, and then you may feel as romantic as you like and tell her all about your elation: it will do you good and her as well. . . . Now to come back to our G.P.U. man; you said he was a student and an idealist; perhaps in that case you had better make him a student of philosophy. Something like this:

"In those days Fyodor Baltin believed in the omnipotence of abstract thought; he used to forget his hunger in heated discussions of such problems as free will, spirit and matter, good and evil. . . ."

"How will that do? Write it down. The story must be fifteen hundred words, you said, so do not allow more than a hundred for the characterisation of the hero. . . ."

In the third week Nadya insisted on moving home, too early as the doctor said. A few days later she was back in hospital: a new trouble had developed, not dangerous this time, but extremely painful. I understood now why I could remain so calm during the first, really dangerous stage of her illness. It had been painless, that was why. The question had been: would her heart stand the strain or not? If not, she would die—and somehow death, whether my own or somebody's else's, never frightens me. I take it "philosophically," it fits in with my outlook on life, to my mind it has sense and justification. So has mental suffering, which, as I see it, often serves the useful purpose of pushing the man off the place on which otherwise he might stay too long. But physical pain baffles me: I cannot see its use in human evolution, I cannot think what good can be got out of it; it appears to me as a bit of nightmare incrustated by some oversight into the scheme of life. And I (my body) have always been abnormally sensitive to Nadya's pain, so much so that I have sometimes foreseen its coming in advance. So this time, as on so many occasions before, her pain threw me off my balance and plunged me into a half-physical depression similar to that vague *malaise* which often precedes an illness. And it was just in her presence,

just when I ought to help her, that I felt particularly depressed. Dissociation did not help much; the moment I relaxed my hold of the elastic the whole complex of negative emotions would start into action. . . . My visits to the hospital at that period were, I dare say, a lamentable failure and a lesson in humility: I was reminded once more that there were a good many things in me with which I could do little more than nothing.

On the other side of the watertight partition, that life of mine which centred on Lina was following its pre-ordained course. I never tried to stop half-way—that was impossible—and soon a full-grown longing was added to the obsession of thought. No amount of self-detachment had the slightest effect on either. Yet I went on pulling the elastic, reminding myself that effort, like physical energy, is never wasted, cannot be wasted; even if you seem to get nowhere, go on working on yourself, and you will be rewarded at some time and in some way which you cannot foresee.

This rule proved true. I soon noticed that—for the first time in my life—longing did not make me miserable. On the contrary I enjoyed every minute of it, I enjoyed it the more the stronger it was, provided I did not protest or struggle. That was the whole trick; so long as I accepted the longing—let myself go, so to speak, and did not worry about the future—I felt happy and keyed up; life around me was richer, more interesting and more significant; my impressions were sharper and clearer, whether I was listening to somebody or gazing at the clouds or reading a novel; and the amount of beautiful eyes I saw in the streets seemed to have

increased tenfold. I slept well and worked better and more easily than usual. Often the thought came to me: This is how one should always live, every day and every hour of one's life; this is my normal state, this and not these drab moods in which most of my days were spent. . . .

I saw plenty of Lina. Knowing where the danger lay, I made a point of not seeing her after sunset and I tried to be out of doors with her as much as possible. For if we stayed in her flat my breath began to go wrong after a while, and an enervating tremor would run along my legs and arms—clearly the work of imagination suggesting to my muscles that I should seize her in my arms. She was quick to catch the disturbance in me, and then we both became self-conscious.

She could not get rid of the thought that I might be unhappy on her account. I had to come back to that point once more.

"You have no business to worry over me," I said. "I'm not unhappy and don't propose to be. Also, this is my biscuit. We made that quite clear the other day, didn't we?"

"Yes, but don't you see . . ."

"I see that you're building up a habit of worrying—as I did in my relationship with my wife. The impulse in both cases is laudable—sympathy with the other fellow; but the results are bad. Believe me, I know what I'm doing, so let me do it. Your worry can only make things more difficult for me. Our relationship must be habit-free at all cost."

The surprising thing was that she did understand me and actually stopped worrying. She cast off all constraint and self-consciousness, she entered the spirit of my experiment.

"We are doing something queer, which most people would call unnatural," I said. "Heaven knows how it will end. One thing is clear: you mustn't fall in love with me, for if that happens we'll be in a horrid mess. You know the lines:

The pleasure of possessing
Surpasses all expressing,
But 'tis too short a blessing
And love too long a pain.

That, of course, isn't always true, but it would be true in our case, it would mean endless misery for both of us. You see that, don't you?"

She nodded.

"But why are you saying that," she asked, "since one can't control these things, anyhow?"

"One can't control them, but one can influence them to some extent by taking up this or that attitude. If, for instance, you are romantically minded and think of love in terms of bright rainbows and unearthly bliss, you increase whatever chances there are of your falling in love. So be realistic, and always keep in mind the practical aspect of our relationship. The fact alone that I, who have eaten half a dozen of your lunches, can't afford to ask you to one is ominous enough. Just imagine what that would mean in case of a liaison. A sordid outlook, eh? . . . No, attitude can't do everything, but it can do a lot. To put it in a formula: Feeling equals emotion plus attitude."

I felt proud of my neat formula and a little annoyed when she nodded acquiescence in an almost casual, matter-of-fact way. "Do you mean to say you knew that?" I asked.

She nodded again.

"Yes," she said, with the frown which she often assumed when talking about serious matters. "I've been thinking about it all these days."

"Have you?" I asked incredulously. And since she never came forth with her thoughts without being prompted: "In what connection?"

She told me about a painful crisis which she had gone through recently and of which the consequences were still cropping up in her life. Her story does not belong to these pages; suffice it to say that she did prove her point: she understood the relation between attitude and emotion.

"Not bad for twenty-six," I observed. "I feel humble and mildly crushed."

Our conversation took place in Regent's Park. I saw her home and stayed to tea. Knowing that I had a sweet tooth, she had ordered my favourite *éclairs* from a French baker's. I said No, thank you, but she would not have it.

"Oh, please, take one," she insisted. "Or don't you like them any more?"

"I do. Almost as much as I like your eyes."

"Then you must have one. You must."

"I can't."

"Nonsense! You ate nothing at lunch, and now you refuse even this. I can't understand what your idea is."

She had been very calm and detached a few hours earlier when speaking of the crisis in her life, and on the day when I declared my passion; but now my indifference to the *éclairs* really upset her and her face contracted in a grimace of unhappiness.

In the end, as she would not cheer up, I had to tell her the truth.

"I can't eat in your presence," I said. "Honestly and truly I can't. Whenever I am with you something goes wrong with my diaphragm, so that I feel slightly sick the whole time. It begins an hour before I am to meet you and ends almost the moment I leave you. And food makes it much worse."

We both had a good laugh. Then a look of anxiety came into her eyes.

"Oh, but surely, Nikolai, that's all wrong!" she began. But I interrupted her.

"It isn't wrong, it's perfectly normal, at least for temperamental people. Romeo must have felt as queasy as I do when he was serenading Juliet, but as a concession to the romanticism of his public, Shakespeare had to skip over that detail. Besides, may I remind you of our agreement: no pitying each other and no maternal protection. Can I have one of your Turkish cigarettes, O Juliet?"

Nadya was still in hospital. She hardly slept at all on account of the pain. Now and again when talking to me she would bite her lip and fall silent, two vertical creases cutting into her forehead; then I would fall silent too, pull the elastic, and watch the mechanism of bodily sympathy destroy the orderliness of my emotions and thoughts. By the time I began to scramble out of the slough of despondency her fit would have passed, and when she opened her eyes I would read suppressed reproach in them.

Monday, 2 a.m. I have been working like a nigger, I am tired, and my thoughts are feverishly elated.

You must believe me when I say that so far I have not known one moment of misery on account of you. Plenty of exaltation, as much as I can take in, and hardly any happiness. Sometimes, when I am with you or remember you, joy begins to rise in me, intoning a song of triumph and sending a cold shiver down my spine. Then I hasten to pull the elastic; my double looks at me, and the joy subsides under his glance. . . . Why do I summon him?

"Parisfal" was my favourite opera once. It moved me tremendously: I cried every time I saw it, and I thought with pride: How good I am at taking music in! I know better now: I know that I was listening not so much to the opera as to the emotions it aroused in me, the echoes of the pain I had suffered in the past. Listening to those echoes, I missed the impersonal beauty of the music; and in the same way when now I yield to happiness I miss the bigger thing, that impersonal reality which is behind my little sentiments that unknown force which draws a man to a woman, me to you. Perhaps it cannot be observed directly; yet once or twice I thought I caught a glimpse of that force, and then an extraordinary feeling came over me: I felt what a man from the dull North must feel when for the first time he beholds the terror of a tropical thunderstorm. And that is why when I hear happiness knock at the door I say to it: No, I'm not interested, I'm waiting for something better.

N.G.

A month has passed since Nadya went to the hospital and she is still there. They say: "We'll let her out soon." But they have said that so often. And her pain is as bad as ever. She has had too much of it in her life; it's unfair—senseless and aimless cruelty.

Senseless? But no, only man's doings can be senseless, and since pain pervades the whole universe, from the amoeba to man's spirit, it *must* have sense. Perhaps to find it one ought to start from the other, non-material side of life, from mental suffering. That, I know, has sense: nature, which wants consciousness to grow in us, inflicts suffering on us—pulls us up, so to speak—when ever we are not conscious of our Great Body, when we let it be ruled, shaken and exhausted by conflicts and automatism. Now, can't one apply the same reasoning to physical pain? is it not simply the other, cruder half of the same educational punishment? Since the physical, emotional and intellectual systems in us are closely inter-related, cannot one assume that all conflicts and all automatism in our muscles, glands, bones and blood are but a reflection of some parallel conflicts and automatism which—perhaps unknown to us—take place in our emotional and intellectual selves? We know that emotion causes certain muscles to contract and that thought affects glandular secretion; so why not prolong the line of interrelation to the end: If the man is physically ill, that means that his soul is lacking balance and wastes too much vitality in useless friction. That would account for the cases of miraculous physical healing through ecstatic enlightenment: once the soul, by a *tour de force*, has managed to put itself in order, the cause of physical disease is removed and health must return. It would account, too, for the commoner fact that happy lovers do not fall ill. Why should they, if

for once their Great Bodies are free of inner conflict and function as they are meant to function?

Speculation, no more than that. But constructive speculation, since it points at the aim one should never forget, the aim of self-knowledge and consciousness.

. . . The tray, two empty coffee-cups, two jugs, the sugar-bowl—I made myself look at them all the time I spoke. For I wanted to be clear, for my own sake rather than for hers, and I knew that if I raised my head and saw her eyes my thought would lose its fluency.

She had started this talk by asking me—out of the blue as she sometimes did—whether Christ believed in the Devil. I promptly said “Yes.” Then, with less assurance, I said “No.” Then I confessed I did not know. We consulted the Gospel, but it is extremely vague on that point; its statements lend themselves to any interpretation you like. In the end I decided the only thing to do was to ask oneself: Could and would Christ as I conceive Him believe in the Devil? For my part I thought He could not; such a belief was incompatible with my conception of Christ, and unnecessary. Unnecessary because all evil can be regarded simply as absence of good, just as weakness is absence of strength, death absence of life, darkness absence of light, and so on.

“Good and evil as two separate, permanent, non-relative entities cannot exist,” I said. “If they existed they would be found along the whole line of evolution—amœba, monkey, man—which is obviously not the case. An amœba or a monkey cannot be bad, no matter how nastily they behave to other infusoria or vertebrates. As for human good and evil, they are obviously relative to

time and geographical space: there is no evil which was not considered as good in some country at some epoch, and vice versa.

"And yet, however different and contradictory their contents, all moral codes seem to be built round one idea which they express more or less adequately: the idea of consciousness. Roughly speaking, good indicates the direction of consciousness; evil, the direction away from it into black unawareness; and God is consciousness, with infinity for its radius. The starting-point of all morals is consciousness of self: a good man or a saint is one who knows his Great Body so well as to obviate automatism and inner conflict: he knows how not to waste his energy, and he uses it to extend the radius of his consciousness beyond his personal circumference—towards other men and the world of the superhuman. Evil from that point of view is man's tendency to draw in the radius of his consciousness and increase his automatism, which he does by accepting every whim and impulse of his as though they were expressions of the whole of him. Since the physical body is the oldest, best-developed and strongest part of him, a minimum of consciousness and a maximum of automatism usually mean the domination of man by his physical instincts; hence the very crude monastic—and Puritan—conception of the body as the vessel of Satan."

I found it more and more difficult to speak, for the radius of my intellect was shrinking under the action of my personal conflict. Presently I had to break off. "I'm sorry, I must go now," I said, rising.

I saw she was about to say: "Why, it's early yet!" but a glance at me made her keep silent and grow serious.

"I shan't see you for a week," I continued. "It's a test. If in that week I don't take myself in hand I shall have

to part with you for good. I'm sorry to say I'm losing my head."

She said nothing. She had risen, too, and stood very quiet and erect, looking past me with a sad, tense look in her eyes.

"So perhaps I shan't see you again," she said tonelessly.

"You will. I'll come in any case, if only to say good-bye. *Au revoir* for the moment."

I bowed, opened the door and stepped out into the corridor.

"Don't forget to take Sedobrol," she called after me. For at lunch, on learning that I had been sleeping badly the night before, she had given me a few tablets.

From her I went on to Vincent's. As usual, he made me drink a fair amount of wine. From the fact that it had very little effect on me, I knew I was in for another sleepless night, and remembering the tablets in my pocket, I asked him how one took them. He did not know. Nor did his wife. I rang up Elsa, and she did not know either.

When I came home at midnight I found a telegram awaiting me on the mat in the hall: SEDOBROL TAKE TWO TABLETS IN HOT WATER.

A pang of fear shot through me. For this was not the first instance of thought-reading between us. There had been that night when she had a bad fright, and exactly at the same time—it tallied to a minute—I had sat up in my bed and switched on the light, seized by an uncontrollable panicky fear. There had been that other occasion when we had agreed to. . . . But I did not allow myself to dwell on the meaning of it. "Nonsense," I said to myself.

In the days that followed I did my normal amount of work, saw as many people as I could, and was socially speaking in good form. But my inner world was out of joint, I realised that whenever I found myself alone. I would think of Nadya in the hospital—and despondency would sweep over me. I would remember Lina—and stare defeat in the face. It was the body, of course, which created that turgid chaos in me by turning everything that drew me to her, every emotion and thought connected with her, into crude physical desire. Self-detachment became more and more difficult; the elastic showed an enormous resistance. I lived in a state of fever, with my hands—particularly my finger-tips—on fire, my throat dry, a sickly feeling in the diaphragm, and a restless exhausting longing. It grew worse from day to day, and I was helpless against it, as helpless as I had been four years ago when fighting my obsession with Miriam. I knew I could have coped with sexual desire alone—as I had done in June—but this time I was up against an all-round love, and it proved too strong for me. I had bitten off more than I could chew.

The sixth night was awful. Hour after hour I tossed from side to side, my nerves taut, my muscles aching with futile strain, my heart pounding heavily. Again and again I remembered her as I had seen her for the first time, standing in the middle of her drawing-room, very erect and collected, with that characteristic look—gentle, intense, and a little astonished—in her wonderful eyes. She had offered me a cigarette, and when I saw the case tremble slightly in her hand I had known at once, in a flash, that I could say anything to her and she would understand, because we were both tuned to the same wave-length. On that visit I had been looking at the carpet most of the time—a blue carpet with some white

design—because her eyes when I met them made me smile when there was no reason for smiling. . . . I was not speaking to her now; I just stood next to her and waited, conscious in every nerve of her slim, firm body within a yard of mine, the girlish oval of her face, the firm, sensual fullness of her lips, lips made for wild kisses, such as I could give her. “Come, come!” I called to her mutely, and she came, she flung her arms round my neck, pressed her body against mine. . . .

Frantically I would pull the elastic and watch the automatic mechanism of sex turning, turning, turning. The same thing over and over again—oh, how I was tired of it, tired, tired! All I wanted now was to sleep and not think, not remember. . . . I would shut my eyes and make my mind blank. For a while that helped; but no sooner did the effort cease than her image would step forward and the waves of chaos would close over my mind once more.

There came a moment of utter exhaustion when I wanted to cry, complain aloud, share my misery with someone. I wished Nadya were there; I thought of ringing up somebody, anybody, just to hear a live voice; and when my misery was at its worst, I, the confirmed unbeliever, tried desperately to believe in a personal God whom I might ask for comfort and oblivion. . . . Since that night I understand why free-thinkers and hard-boiled materialists embrace Catholicism. It is not conversion: it is weakness, but one for which I cannot blame or despise them any more.

I worked at my manuscript the whole of the following day, for something like twelve hours: my literary

mechanism was apparently the only part of me that had escaped disorganisation. In the evening I took a novel and tried to read, but instead—a thing which never happens to me—I fell asleep in an arm-chair. It was a shallow superficial sleep, a state of mental twilight which did not free me from an oppressive sense of tiredness and strain, and presently I decided to wake up and go to bed. I tried to sit up—and could not, for something had happened to the arm-chair, it was tilted back so far that my head and my feet were on one level. The lamp behind me had been switched off; the room was dark, and in that darkness a translucent pillar of pale light was rising vertically from my chest to the ceiling, a pillar alive with a multitude of whirling minute particles, such as the morning sun discovers in the air when shining through a window. I instantly understood that the phenomenon did not belong to the physical world: the whirling pillar was my own life, or rather the bigger universal life streaming through me, a life containing my present and my future, my reality as well as my possibilities, the possibilities of actions I might commit, turns I might take, relationships I might form or break. One strand of particles looked darker than the rest; that, I realised, was the fatal strand, which, if I were to follow it, would lead me to an irreparable catastrophe. All these possibilities were in me now, at this very moment, and it was up to me to choose those I wanted and reject the others. I and only I was to make the choice, but once the choice was made nothing could ever unmake it. . . . An unaccountable horror seized me at that thought; and the same instant the X-ray apparatus was switched off, the translucent pillar went out, the sense of familiar reality returned to me: I recognised the desk, the sofa, the dark Medici print. . . . My hands were ice-cold and

a hysterical tremor was shaking my body, whilst my dazed mind was repeating an odd formula it had brought back from the land of the vision: "Make your fever work for you."

I took a triple dose of Sedobrol: I could not face insomnia, not that night.

Seldom had I practised self-detachment more successfully than I did the next morning. In my mind I went over the last days and simply could not understand what all the trouble had been about. I loved a woman; I knew she had a deep affection for me; we were happy together—what else did I want? Desire had only worried me because I had been fighting it instead of accepting it and passively watching its action within me. And my whole attitude to what was happening to me had been wrong: I had not been sufficiently aloof from my emotions and my body, I had too often identified myself with them. Had I more often remembered to keep outside them, I should have been aware the whole time of the enormous value of the experience I was going through, I should have enjoyed it all, elation, calm and strain alike, because there is no greater thing than to be alive, abundantly and consciously alive. I had wasted the richest and most interesting days of my life. . . .

I sat down to write a short story, and wrote it all in one go, marvelling at the unwonted ease with which the words came to my mind. By one o'clock the story was done; I boiled two eggs and sat down to eat them in the kitchen—to save bother. Then the hitch occurred: I found I could not eat, could not even look at the eggs.

I took them into the pantry and left the kitchen. My serenity was gone.

In the drawing-room I took a novel and read. But I soon put the book down. It was no use, I could not follow the story, for I was all the time aware of being hungry, and that sensation of hunger fusing with the repellent memory of the eggs produced in me an intense feeling of physical depression akin to despair. "Non-sense," I said to myself, "I won't be upset on account of two eggs!" But the feeling grew; try as I might I could not shake it off, could not struggle against it, could not even begin to struggle.

Then I understood. My depression came not from hunger at all, but from something which had been revealed to me through hunger, from the sudden realisation of the fact that my conscious self was weaker than my body. So far, by putting the whole of myself into resisting bodily desire for the woman I had managed to hold my own against it. But I had not the strength to keep up that effort any longer, and if I let it slacken, desire would at once get the better of me and swamp me. I was at the cross-roads, actually facing that choice of possibilities which last night's vision had shown me symbolically. If I did not elude desire by changing my direction now, immediately, I should never find the energy to do it, I should be caught in the fatal dark strand, I should ruin my married life, undo all the work I had done on myself and doom myself to endless misery. To avoid catastrophe I had to act at once.

The clock showed two, and as Lina and I had agreed to meet in the park at half-past three, there was another hour to wait. That was too much, and I rang her up, meaning to ask her to meet me earlier, at two-thirty.

She answered literally a second after I had heard the purring sound of connection established, and her voice sounded so queer that I asked her what the matter was.

"How strange!" she said in a tone of bewilderment. "I was just going to ring you up and tell you I was free now; I was actually stretching out my hand for the receiver when the bell went off. Isn't that strange?"

"It is," I said. "Particularly since. . . . Yes, by all means let's meet earlier. Can you manage two-thirty?"

She could.

It happened very quickly—and, of course, not at all as I anticipated.

On the way to the park I had decided that before passing to serious themes I would give myself an hour's grace, during which time I proposed to be as light and gay as I could. To tune myself up for the light mood, I meant to give her a bronze threepenny piece which I had just received from the bus-conductor.

"Here is something for luck," I said, handing the piece to her. "It's sure to bring luck, because it's the first of that kind I've had in my hands."

"Thank you," she said, with her usual emphatic politeness, and, opening her bag, produced a similar piece. "And this is for you."

We stared at each other.

"Where did you get it?" I asked, unpleasantly aware of a tremor spreading over my body.

"In the tube as I was coming here."

"Just now?"

"Yes. So I decided I would give it to you."

Fear seized me.

"Lina, you aren't in love with me?" I cried (or whispered, I do not remember which).

She shook her head.

"No, I'm not," she said in a low voice, gazing fixedly and seriously at me.

"Are you sure?" I persisted. "Are you, Lina? Because if you are wrong, God help us both!"

"Yes, I'm sure," she repeated more firmly. "You mustn't worry about that, you really mustn't."

"But all these coincidences. They aren't coincidences"

"But I tell you I'm sure. I know, because . . ."

"Because what?"

"Because . . . oh well, I love you too much to do that to you."

. . . For some reason the big moments in a man's life, whether they be made of joy, pain, or astonishment, or all three, have a dream-like quality, so that everything around him—the trees, the sky, the people and that central face he is looking at—seems to swing over to another unfamiliar and unreal dimension of existence. What one does and says in those moments has no importance whatever. I said nothing, I was too shaken to speak or think, I only felt that with those few words she had uttered, a new and entirely unforeseen force had entered my life, was acting in me already, and that, thanks to that force, I was now able to achieve what had seemed impossible, had been impossible hitherto. . . .

"Make your fever work for you"—the clumsy formula of the dreamland had, I found, some sense in it and fitted in with my understanding of the task before me. That

which cannot be suppressed must be made to serve my ends; just as in jiu-jitsu a man uses his opponent's strength to bring him down so I must divert all the energy of desire into self-detachment. And with all the determination I was capable of, I set to work on myself. For whole days I lived in a state of mental intoxication; I would summon my double when I was in bed, in a bus or at table; when I ate or typed or talked; I would keep him at the end of the elastic until I lost awareness of my surroundings; and it occurred sometimes that I would walk down a street without noticing where I was. Often, only too often, the stubborn resistance of my automatic selves filled me with despair; often it seemed to me that I had not advanced one inch since the day when I had first practised self-detachment; but I did not relax my efforts, for behind the doubt and the strain there was now a new feeling of assurance and a new impetus: I had to win both for my sake and hers, I could not betray the trust she put in me.

And I did win. A fortnight later I felt sure enough of myself to ring her up and ask when I could see her. I heard her catch her breath. "Oh. . . . Can you come to-day, now?"

And that is the end of my last—I hope my very last—romance and the beginning of a new relationship for which I have no name.

Then Nadya came back home, weak but mended, hollow-eyed but pretty, very thin and—for once—resigned to rest and do nothing. "Look at my hands, they are like a lady's," she said. "I haven't had such hands for eighteen years, not since we had to dismiss Jennie."

Alas, a month later her hands were as rough as ever, what with knitting, sewing, cleaning the stoves and peeling potatoes. Which meant that our life had resumed its normal course.

I go on seeing Lina. Sometimes we walk a mile without saying a word, finding silence quite as interesting as conversation; sometimes we talk nonsense or discuss serious things, from Dunne's interpretation of time dimensions—which neither of us can understand—to the latest fashions, about which she knows everything, although she seems not to be interested in them. Now and again I suggest we do some bickering, for it is unnatural never to have any dissension; but my suggestion is not taken up. I cannot eat properly when I am with her; the sight of food repels me, which means that the body has a long memory and won't forget violence which has been done to it. I only see her at rare intervals, never touch her and avoid shaking hands: it is safer that way.

Often when I think that three first-rate women honour me with their affection I experience a feeling of humiliation akin to shame. It is the feeling which millionaires ought to have—and never have: the feeling of being given too much. But then I remind myself that I am disgustingly poor in everything else which the world regards as "real" value, and the question crops up in my mind: Perhaps after all there is such a thing as compensation? It is a metaphysical question, and as I fight shy of metaphysics I do not attempt to answer it.

Yes, all by myself I failed to harness love: the idea was far too ambitious. But I stood up to love and was not defeated: I have not been miserable myself—except for one night—and have not caused a moment's misery to anyone else; I went on working on myself and my book, and I saved everything that was valuable in my relationship with Lina: looking back, I do not find one word or one action which I should like to forget or alter. For an impetuous, emotional man of my type this is quite a good achievement, for which all the credit is due not to me and not even to her but to the method I used. Without it I could not have avoided a catastrophe—of that I am absolutely sure when I remember the devastation which the very incomplete, lop-sided infatuation with Miriam wrought in me a few years ago. And that to me is a conclusive proof of the value of the method.

But that is not all. The work I did on myself during those difficult weeks had another result which I had neither expected nor aimed at. I find that I love my wife more and better now than I did before, this because to a large extent I have succeeded in freeing our relationship from the destructive habit of worry and its everyday counterpart, the habit of irritation. For the first time in my life I feel entitled to say: I have changed myself.

I have good reasons for asserting that other people will find the method as beneficial as I did (or even more so), provided they genuinely wish to get out of the circle of their automatic reactions and are prepared to work hard to that end. Given those two conditions, they will discover after some time—it may be weeks, it may be months—that apart from enabling them to cope with this or that particular problem, the work will reward them in another, permanent way by a heightened mental well-being, a steady self-confidence, brighter interest in life

and a sense of expanding, slowly expanding horizons. And increased tolerance—if like myself they happen to be short of that useful commodity: for once they have gauged and experienced the terrific resistance of their own automatism—of which most of them are unaware at present—they will understand how helpless other people are to break the momentum of *their* mechanical thinking and feeling, how unavoidably and inescapably they must be what they are and behave as they do. Being what they call in Russia a “Communoid,” I could not, at one time, walk along the street without experiencing a feeling of revolt at the sight of the senseless luxury and overfed vulgarity which abound in the respectable parts of London. I still consider them as a cancerous growth on the body of society, but I have ceased to waste my emotional energy on them. The same with literature: I used to see red when thinking of the nonsense, sincere and hypocritical, which flows from the reviewers’ pens: of the lack of conscientiousness and self-criticism in many writers; of the rapid vulgarisation of the public taste. I still think that literature is being throttled by commerce, but that does not annoy me any longer: why bristle with indignation if I cannot do anything about it? I can even contemplate with equanimity the larger issue, the triumphant advance of the lowbrow along the whole front of civilisation: so long as I do not actually feel their victorious cudgel on my back—and I do feel it sometimes—I ignore their triumph and cultivate my own garden. And I am not even sure that I grudge them their success. For one must admit that the highbrows, equipped though they were with all kinds of knowledge—except the one that matters most, self-knowledge—have badly failed to put it to good use. They have enormously complicated the psychic life of man without making him

more conscious of himself, and through this wrong complication they have upset the balance of his Great Body. Perhaps the lowbrows will restore it, even if at the moment it looks as though they were aiming at a complete mechanisation of man. *Quien sabe?* That might be the right line to take at first.

I still have to contend with poverty. The absence of nice things does not matter—one gets used to it more easily than people think (positive habit); but the feeling of helplessness that comes from utter insecurity is a formidable adversary of happiness. I had bad luck with my last novel, and none of my short stories were accepted anywhere—my agent thought they were not bad enough—with the result that our finances sank lower than they had ever done: one day we had eight shillings in the house, an overdraft of five pounds, and no prospects of any kind. The elastic had to be pulled very often and very hard; fear would shrink under the double's glance and grow anew when he withdrew. I could not smile, and my over-vitalised daughter, to whom responsibility is but a word, was justified in comparing me with a wet rag. But except for one day I managed not to be miserable, and that again, considering my propensity for worrying, is not bad.

When the crisis was over—first a Norwegian publisher bought the translation rights of *Angry Dust*, then Vincent came to the rescue—I told Lina about it. “Gosh, you never let on!” she said, which, coming from her who reads me pretty well, was a compliment. Then, flaring up: “But why didn’t you tell me? I would have loved to help you, and I could have done it because I have sixty pounds at the bank. . . . Yes, yes, I know what you are going to say, but that’s all nonsense.” I had no choice but to take her head in my hands and kiss it. Which was a

mistake, for the whole day after that my wrists and fore-arms were tingling as though I had burnt them.

In due time I told Nadya everything. She was shocked, unpleasantly shocked, but not pained, for she knew that all the time I had loved her as fully as before—more fully, in fact. But when I try to explain that this was *because* and not in spite of my having met Lina; when I quote a Russian man of genius who, in reply to my query whether one could love two at the same time, said: “Two is but a figure, and the human soul knows no mathematics”; when I advance the view that apart from being a type of relationships love is also a *state* of the Great Body, a state of heightened self-awareness and widened consciousness—then she argues with me heatedly and logically, forgetting that life in its deeper layers, on the fringe of metaphysics, ceases to be logical.

Needless to say, she blames me strongly for writing about Lina. “There is,” she says, “something indecent in the way you turn your recent relationships inside out.” Well, some people think it indecent to enlighten children on the facts of life, others to laugh loud in a bus, and personally I always found that the Russian word *yabloko* as well as its English equivalent, Apple, have an obscene sound. Any taste is equally justifiable—so long as we do not compel others to share it.

Then came that nightmarish week, when caught in a paroxysm of hatred and fear, Europe feverishly started preparing for self-destruction. The habitual reasoning

on the lines of Right and Wrong proved once more hopelessly inadequate for the understanding of the situation, since even in the simple question of the German–Czech conflict there were clearly two chains of Wrong and Counter-Wrong extending into the infinity of the past. It was wrong of Germany to bully little Czechoslovakia; but in doing so she only meant to redress the wrong which had been done to her in 1918; which in turn was the result of her having wronged several nations in 1914; but she had to wrong them because they would not let her expand; and they could not let her expand because . . . and so on, as far back as 1812 or the campaigns of Julius Cæsar or the first squabble between Abel and Cain. And it was equally impossible to determine what was good policy and bad policy. To fight was obviously bad, because that meant the ruin of Europe; to give in was bad, because it meant perpetuating the rule of the mailed fist; and to negotiate was bad, because international promises are not stronger than the paper on which they are written, and no war at the moment may mean a much worse war later on.

As I did not intend to waste my time and my vitality in an attempt to solve the insoluble, I refused to think of politics. I decided that so long as there was no war I would go on writing as though nothing had happened. And that was what I did. Thanks to the method of dissociation I managed, all through the critical week, to work exactly as calmly and productively (or unproductively) as ever, at the rate of eight hours a day. But whenever I detached myself from the manuscript I became aware of the vibrations of fear which were sent out by eight millions around me and generated within myself. Then I would pull the elastic and watch the phenomenon of fear in myself.

Fear is both egoistic and altruistic: one is afraid both for oneself and one's family, friends, neighbours. As it passes through the three planes of the Great Body, fear divides into three streams. At the core, in the physical body, there is the instinctive fear, exactly the same which seizes an animal at the sight of a forest fire: an automatic straining of the body as it gets ready to repel the danger. That strain (produced by the secretion of adrenal glands?), as well as the reaction against it, the feeling of heaviness or numbness, spread, so far as I could observe, all over the body, from head to foot, like the effect of a drug or a poison. And because they are not localised, I for one could not "get at them" at all: I could not stop them from acting in me the whole time, whether I worked or slept or ate. That was why, in spite of my having slept very well and kept my emotional and intellectual systems in good order, my face at the end of that week had the same pinched look as many other faces had. I am sure that only freaks and men with exceptionally weak imagination can keep immune from that instinctive fear; the rest of us must content ourselves with not letting fear disorganise our emotion and intellect. In so far as we succeed in that we shall behave "as though" we were not frightened—and be called brave.

The second layer is emotional fear, a feeling of unrest which has its seat in the region of the diaphragm. It is just one of the numerous disorganising emotions and expresses itself in the same automatic functions of the body as any serious worry does: involuntary contraction of muscles, abruptness of gesture, an urge to move about or at least to talk. By summoning the double I could tone down emotional fear or even dissolve it altogether in one to two minutes (which is quite a long time for dissociation). The trouble was that soon after my having

withdrawn the elastic, emotional fear would revive under the action of disturbed instinct. I have no doubt, however, that with long practice and hard work one can keep oneself almost permanently immune from emotional fear.

By intellectual fear I mean the automatic passage of thoughts and images suggested by emotion: visions of death and destruction, thoughts of discomfort, suffering and cultural decay. This is imagination pure and simple, the same which operates in most worries. I found it could be very effectively dealt with: I easily kept my mind off the crisis for quite a long time even when I was not working, even when I was aware of emotional fear stirring in me.

In conditions of actual and not imaginary danger the phenomenon is, of course, the same in structure, only its intensity and the difficulty of coping with it will increase. One part of me regrets that I had no opportunity of tackling fear at its strongest, amidst bursting shells and crashing buildings: that would have added a lot to my self-knowledge.

Lately an unfamiliar mood of aloofness has been coming upon me. I am ceasing to want, I am losing interest in everything of which my life is made: Nadya and other people, my work on myself and literature. It is not pining for novelty, I do not want to see new faces or read new books. Nor is it weariness, for I am at peace with myself. It is expectation: my mind seems to withdraw into itself and rest prior to striking some altogether new line of interests and preoccupations which it will discover in some indefinite future. I can approximately guess the direction of that line.

Some of my friends do not understand how I can do

without religion or metaphysics, why I never discuss those subjects and refuse to read books on ultimate problems. The fact is that I am not ready for Higher Truth, that is, the laws which rule the whole of humanity and the whole of the universe. Before tackling these big problems I feel I must put in order the microscopic universe of myself and my personal relationships. To this end I endeavour to understand the mechanism of my Great Body, to find the points at which the application of consciousness gives the best results, and to apply the maximum of consciousness to those points; by so doing I stop wasting my energy, become happier myself and hurt other people less than I used to. That is my job for the moment—and a whole-time job it is. Therefore, if to-night the starry sky should reveal the Ultimate Truth to me, I would shut my eyes and say: "I have not seen anything." For how am I, the muddled self who cannot even make out what compels me to smoke an evil-smelling herb called tobacco, or why I feel depressed this morning, how can I hope to determine whether the revelation I have had is a true one and not a mirage projected by some ambitious little self of mine? The psychic atmosphere of our decaying civilisation is saturated with bogus revelations. I do not mean such ludicrous cases as the spinster who, to compensate herself for the ingratitude of her pets, indulges in communion with some floating Mahatma; or the parson who, depressed by the drabness of his parish, makes himself see in all details the malachite pillars and the golden cupolae of the Lord's abode. I mean people who can think and have thought: the chemist who sublimates his annoyance with the unresponsive molecules into a vision of the Holy Virgin; the brilliant cynic who finds a new impetus for life in some abstruse and arbitrary Diagram of Creation; the

scientist who meets the soul of his deceased child over a spinning-table. The strongest intellects have been known to resolve their spiritual dissatisfaction in a blind leap into the irrational—and it is that against which I wish to guard myself. . . . By saying that I do not mean that there is no genuine mysticism, but merely that I am afraid of mistaking the sham for the genuine article.

Even if the revelation of Higher Truth were brought to me by an authentic messenger of the Lord I would turn away from him, or at least try to turn away. For I do not feel mature enough to accept the gift. How can I make good use of it, I who constantly misapply the little personal truths which I dig out of my consciousness? I know such scruples do not bother most people who circumvent them by erecting a partition between their Truth and their everyday life. Thus the good Christian who persuades himself that Righteousness is one thing and bullying and under-paying his servant quite another; or the genuine mystic who finds it quite natural to get drunk as an owl five days a week; or the enlightened thinker who plays the tyrant at home. They are often not aware of any contradiction in them, but in their place I should be; and since I suspect that I am still too chaotic and weak to conform my life to a Higher Truth I would say to the bearer of the revelation: "No, sir, not yet."

And yet the expectation is there. I am particularly aware of it when the sun shines bright and I look at the blue sky. Both of them, sun and sky, have something to do with those unknown thoughts and preoccupations towards which I am moving through time. The future that contains them may be far away, but I already feel the wafts of coolness it is sending out. Well, there is no

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